

A NEW HISTORY OF SANSKRIT LITERATURE



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# A New History of Sanskrit Literature

Krishna Chaitanya



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TO  
FRANCIS WATSON

TO  
BRANCH WATSON



# Preface

THIS BOOK on the history of Sanskrit literature could not have been written without the help of the works donated to us by the great pioneers: Max Muller (1860), Weber (1878), Macdonell (1900), Winternitz (1927) and Keith (1928).

The question could immediately arise why, when these works are with us, a new book should have been attempted at all. The author is mournfully aware that he cannot give a completely satisfactory answer to that question. The best he can do is to indicate some difficulties he felt, in the case of the works of the pioneers, and which prompted him, perhaps rashly, to undertake the present work.

The earlier works fall broadly into two categories: those which confine themselves to classical literature and those which purport to cover the entire tradition. Keith belongs to the first category. He leaves out the entire mass of the earlier, Vedic literature as well as the epic histories (*Itihasas*) and epic legends (*Puranas*). S.K. De's history, which came out in 1947 and is therefore later than the works by the pioneers already mentioned, also follows Keith as a model. The other works purport to cover the entire range; but a close study would reveal that their treatment of the later, classical literature is very sketchy, as compared with Keith or De, for instance. They really concentrate on Vedic literature. A balanced, complete history, thus, is not available.

Even the histories which seem to cover the entire range totally omit the religious-ethical texts (*Dharma Sastra*). But they form a very important part of the great tradition of what has been called the Wisdom literature of the East.

The philosophical systems, likewise, are either not covered or treated very sketchily. But there are valid reasons why at least a summary account should be included in a history of Sanskrit literature. A history of Greek literature would be unthinkable without accounts of the philosophical doctrines of Plato and Socrates. Sankara's devotional poetry, with its astonishing suggestion of dualism, cannot be understood without a clear idea of the difficulties



in his monism which his intellect solved but his poetic sensibility could not. Lastly, the *Gita*, the great work which sought to synthesize the various philosophical systems, is really an episode, and a crucial episode, in a literary creation, not a separate philosophical treatise. The final resolution of the problems of philosophy was managed, in the Indian tradition, by the aesthetic sensibility.

The epic histories—*Ramayana* and *Maha Bharata*—have been acclaimed by the Indian tradition as its first great literary works. But their treatment by Macdonell and others is extremely sketchy and no adequate attempt has been made towards a genuinely literary evaluation.

A brief account of political thought is also necessary, not only for the full understanding of a play like Visakhadatta's *Mudra Rakshasa*, but also for realising the strong democratic current in *Ramayana* and Kalidasa's *Raghu Vamsa*.

In the presentation also, a different approach seems possible. Keith summarizes in a few lines the story of the epic poem or drama and, in a different section, gives quotations to indicate the style of the writer. A continuous and more integrated approach may, perhaps, do better justice to the works.

Lastly, many old works have been newly published since the latest of the already available histories came out, and some of these are important.

All these considerations only indicate that a new history of Sanskrit literature could probably be attempted, keeping in mind the needs of wider coverage and balance—not that this work can be accepted as such an attempt. But its very weaknesses might draw attention to the deficiencies still remaining uncorrected and stimulate better equipped talents to do something about it.

Krishna Chaitanya



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## A NEW HISTORY OF SANSKRIT LITERATURE





## CHAPTER ONE

## Cultural Background

*outline*  
I. Contours of History

THE PICTURE—painted in strongly contrasted colours by the earlier historians, and fondly cherished even today by many in India who are guilty of the double fallacy of believing in the intrinsic superiority of one race over another and in their own racial purity—of a highly civilised people known as the Aryans flooding into India and completely subjugating the barbarians who were in prior occupation, has not been able to survive subsequent research.

The most substantial evidence of the culture of the Pre-Aryan people of India<sup>1</sup> was yielded by the excavations at Mohenjo Daro and Harappa.<sup>2</sup> These two sites are today part of Pakistan. But since similar finds have been yielded by excavations at Rupar in Punjab, in the bed of the Saraswati river in Rajasthan, in the Narmada basin, in Mysore and elsewhere, scholars have felt justified in assuming that the Indus Valley Civilization, intensively studied at Harappa and Mohenjo Daro, was once coextensive with almost the whole of India. The affinities of this culture with that of Sumeria, the most ancient civilization of the world, have been accepted by almost all scholars. Differences of opinion have emerged only on the question of priority. Macdonell<sup>3</sup> believes that the Pre-Aryan civilization of India was derived from Sumeria. Woolley<sup>4</sup> derives both from a common parent stock in or near Baluchistan. Hall feels that the Sumerians derived their culture from India. An important clue is the fact that similar seals found both in Mesopotamia and India belong to the earliest, Pre-Sumerian, phase of the Mesopotamian culture, but to the latest phase of the Indus Valley Civilization. Authorities like Childe,<sup>5</sup> therefore, have felt justified in giving priority to India.

A great difficulty has been that while scholars have been able to decipher the Sumerian script, the Indus Valley script has so far defied scholars like Heras in spite of the decades of work they have devoted to the attempt. Therefore, we have to re-



construct the culture from the archaeological evidence. But this evidence is eloquent. These pre-historic cities, built five thousand years ago, have superb drainage systems and show excellent evidence of town-planning.<sup>6</sup> Terra-cotta figurines show that textiles with beautiful designs were made by the weavers of this ancient culture. Beautiful jewellery was also fashioned by them. The civilization was urban. The bronze figure of a dancing girl that has come down to us shows that this art must have been widely patronised. It is significant that Indra, the tribal deity of the Aryans, was also called Purandara, the destroyer of cities. To the Aryans, the most striking feature of these earlier people was their beautifully laid out townships. This clearly shows that the Aryans were still nomads when they came upon this people who had already established an urban civilization<sup>7</sup>.

The Aryans<sup>8</sup> came as immigrants and not as conquerors, though history had decreed that they should ultimately dominate the scene. But even here the Aryan dominance declines in power as we move south from the Indo-Gangetic plain. Depending on the distance and the length of the thrust, there is a descending order of Aryan cultural influence in the southern regions of India<sup>9</sup>. Further, the Indus Valley Civilization also managed to infiltrate into the Aryan culture. The cult of the mother goddess, which evolved later into the various forms of Sakti worship, is a legacy from this older culture. Siva is the Aryan transformation of one of the gods of the Indus Valley people. Students of Mesopotamian literature would recall how vividly a storm-god like Adad anticipates the Bhairava and Rudra of the Aryans.)

Since the scene of the history of the two peoples, the original inhabitants of the Indus Valley and the Aryans, is the same and there is chronological continuity, we may be tempted to regard both phases as different stages in the evolution of the same culture. Really, a cultural cycle came to an end with the fall of the cities of the Indus Valley people before the Aryans. As happened elsewhere, an urban civilization, probably weakened by over-refinement, was being overrun by a younger and hardier, and definitely more primitive, people. Historical parallels are the conquest of the Cretan civilization by the Greeks, of the Etruscan by the Romans and, later, of the Romans by the Germanic tribes.



Scholars have not been able to come to any agreement regarding the original home land of the Aryans.<sup>10</sup> The North Pole, the Arctic sea shore, Scandinavia, Lithuania, Bohemia, Transylvania and South Russia have all been suggested by one scholar or another.<sup>11</sup> None of these suggestions can be straightaway dismissed as too fanciful. For instance, the suggestion that Lithuania was the original homeland may seem far-fetched to Indian readers. But let us glance at some of the reasons for the suggestion. Lithuanian rivers have names like Tapti, Nemuna, Srobatī and Narbudey which are surprisingly like the Indian Tapti, Yamuna, Saraswati and Narmada. The tribal or clan names of the ancient Lithuanians such as Kuru, Puru, Yadav and Sudav seem distinctly Aryan; so also are the names of their gods such as Indra, Varuna and Purakanya (the Vedic Parjanya).<sup>12</sup> But the difficulty is that equally impressive affinities have been pointed out in support of the other sites as well. In the circumstances, the most sober course is to recognise that the problem is not capable of a definitive solution with the data at present available.

If the question of the original homeland remains unsolved, the immediate route of the Aryan entry into India poses no serious problem. It is generally accepted that they found their way from Bactria, through the passes of the Hindu Kush mountains, into Afghanistan and thence into the regions of the Punjab.<sup>13</sup> Tribes like the Gandharas lingered in the valleys of the Kubha (Kabul) river and the Suvastu (Swat), a northern tributary. But the main first settlement seems to have been the banks of the Indus. Though the Aryans knew of the Indus' emptying into the ocean, the first settlement could not have extended far beyond the union of the Indus with its five tributaries. To the east, the Sutlej seems to have remained for a long time the boundary. But in course of time, pressed on by advancing tribes behind and enticed by the beauty of the land and the fertility of the soil, spearheads of the immigration crossed the Sutlej and moved forward to the Yamuna and Ganga.<sup>14</sup>

Scholars have shown wide differences of opinion regarding the date of entry of the Aryans into India. A very important evidence relating to this issue is the discovery made by Hugo Winckler in 1907 of certain clay tablets in Boghazkoi, the capital of the ancient kingdom of a people known as Hittites, in Asia Minor.



The tablets include records of treaties concluded by the King of the Hittites and the king of another people known as Mitani, at the beginning of the fourteenth century B.C. The gods of both kingdoms are invoked as guardians of the treaties and in the list of gods there appear the names of Mitra, Varuna and Indra among the gods of the Mitani.<sup>15</sup> This particular grouping of the gods, with these forms of their names, can be traced only in the Veda. Now, the crucial question is this. Were the Mitani a pocket of Aryan tribes which lingered in Asia Minor while the main stream moved east to enter India? In that case, the date of the entry of the Aryans into India would be much later than 1400 B.C. But the phonetics of these names as well as the numerals mentioned in a Hittite text on chariot racing describing horses in a language very much akin to Sanskrit, show that these belong, not to a proto-Indo-Iranian period, or to pockets left behind by the Aryans advancing eastwards, but to colonies of Sanskrit-using Aryans who had migrated westwards from their Indian home.<sup>16</sup> Scholars have felt justified in assuming that just as there were Aryan immigrations into India from the west, there must have been isolated migrations back to the west. We may think either of warlike adventurers or of connections by marriage. The conclusion from this very important piece of evidence is therefore that, about the middle of the second millennium before Christ, Aryan tribes who worshipped Vedic gods must already have been established in north-western India for a very considerable time, as several of these tribes had migrated far back to the west as early as about 1400 B.C. It is conjectured that the Vedas themselves span a millennium. That is, the earliest sections of the Vedas antedate the latest sections by about a thousand years. According to some scholars, the first compilation of the Vedic hymns was made about 1000 B.C. and the text fixed in more or less its present form by about 600 B.C. This gives 2000 B.C. as the approximate date of the Aryan entry into India.

From the Vedas, which are their earliest lore, we get a clear impression of the early Aryans. They are a primitive, but by no means a barbarous, people. They are a vigorous people who eat meat, drink fermented liquor and occasionally indulge in gambling. But they are also gifted with a highly poetic sensibility. These vigorous, primitive sons of the earth are essentially agriculturists



and have not advanced beyond the simple arts of weaving and carpentering, blacksmithy and goldsmithy. Their huts are of the simplest type. Being agriculturists, the cow is their most precious animal and all kinds of advanced ideas develop in association with it, such as Gotra (tribe), Gopa (guardian), Gopati (ruler). They count their wealth in terms of heads of cattle.

The family was the basic unit of social organisation. In times of peace, tribes consisting of a number of families connected by blood ties formed the highest political unit. The form of organisation was more republican than patriarchal or monarchic. The Sabha or the tribal council was the most important political body of the tribal group. In times of campaigning or for defence against threats from enemies, coalitions were formed between tribes. But most of these did not outlive the periods of crisis. However, in certain cases, the leaderships of these coalitions were stabilised and prolonged in times of peace as well, in the form of elected heads of the state or even hereditary rulership. But it must be kept in mind that, in the earlier phase, the older republics also continued to coexist along with these later forms and that, even in the case of hereditary kingship, the ruler's authority was nowhere absolute, but everywhere limited by the will of the people which made its power felt in assemblies of the nation, the district and the individual tribes.

But history was definitely moving towards larger units of organisation, imperial system in fact. We can trace the history of this process fairly clearly from the time of Alexander's invasion of India in the fourth century B.C. onwards. But, for the period before this, our reconstruction must necessarily remain hypothetical and our clues have to be sought in the historical elements of the two great epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. The Vedas themselves show the progressive change that came over political and social attitudes. At first, the in-group sentiment is strong. This is only natural, because the Aryans are newcomers on the scene and their survival would depend on their racial unity. Thus, in the early hymns to their wargod, Indra, there is a strong racial polarisation and the Aryans pray for his help against the enemy-race. But later, we read of conflicts between the Aryan tribes themselves and in the later prayers to Indra, the contrast is between friend and foe and not between Aryan and Non-Aryan,



because both friends and foes may be found in either racial group. This suggests that as the process of racial admixture went on, distinctions of race were gradually effaced and alliances and oppositions between states became purely political issues.

It is on the pattern of the political states which thus emerged that the urge towards imperial organisation began to work. As said earlier, the reconstruction of the trend before Alexander can only be hypothetical. The most plausible reconstruction seems to be the one given by Aurobindo.<sup>17</sup> According to him, the Aryan and Aryanised nations gradually proliferated into three distinct groups. In the eastern group, the Kosalas, Magadhas, Chedis, Videhas and Haihayas were the most important. In the central group, the Bharatas and Panchalas were the most considerable. The third group comprised many vigorous but numerically small peoples in the south and west. These great congeries of nations were welded into empires five times. The Ikshwaku dynasty forged the first two empires, under Mandhata and later under Marutta. The third empire was the creation of the Haihaya warrior Kartavirya Arjuna. The Haihaya period witnessed one of the most catastrophic class wars of early Hindu civilization. Brahmin power had by this time grown strong enough to contest the Kshatriyas or warriors for supremacy. The eastern section of the country was always apt to break away from the strict letter of Aryanism which had by this time become an orthodox creed with a ritualistic religion and a social stratification that gave increasing power to the Brahmins. A conflict was inevitable and Brahmin power was able to mobilise an armed opposition under Parasurama in which the chivalry of India was massacred and for the time broken and the Haihaya empire shattered. The fall of the Haihayas enabled the Ikshwakus to recover imperial power and this new empire of the Ikshwakus, which lasted during the times of Bhagiratha and his descendants up to Rama, was really a golden age for India. After Rama, the power of the Kosalas and the Ikshwaku dynasty declined and the Bharatas rose to power. But this empire also began to decline after reaching its heyday and by the time of Shantanu and Vichitravirya the empire had long been dissolved into its constituent parts. Nevertheless, the possibility of forging it anew still remained. The collapse of the empire, however, had raised to power many strong states in



the different parts of the country, like the Panchalas under Drupada, Sindhu under Jayadratha and Magadha under Jarasandha. The problem became more complicated because the Bharata house itself was divided, due to the rivalry between the Kurus and the Pandavas, though they were close kinsmen. Due to this rivalry, all the nations were drawn into the conflict, on one side or the other. The war raised the Pandavas to power, but their empire seems to have been short-lived.

As handled by the great epic, the Mahabharata war drew into its vortex almost all national groups in India including those in the south. This could of course be a poetic exaggeration. But there is no reason to doubt that the conflict and the alignment of states it implied covered almost the whole of North India. This war for empire was probably fought about 1000 B.C. But the empire was short-lived and by the seventh century B.C. We find Northern India divided into a large number of states, both great and small, monarchical and republican. Sixteen of these states, and a number of small republican clans are specifically mentioned in Buddhist and Brahmanical literature. In addition to Kosala, and Vaisali, the powerful republican state of the Lichhavis which had taken the place of the old kingdom of Videha, three new kingdoms, Magadha, Vatsa and Avanti, with their capitals at Pataliputra (Patna), Kausambi (near Allahabad) and Ujjaini, come to the forefront. Among the small republican states may be mentioned those of the Sakyas and Mallas with their capitals at Kapilavastu and Kusinagara (near Gorakhpur). The first of these two small states won a place in world history by giving to the world one of its greatest teachers, the Buddha.

Magadha began its imperial career in the fifth century B.C. It conquered the small kingdom of Anga on the east, absorbed Vaisali and Kusinagara and reduced the power of Kosala. By the middle of the fourth century B.C., the whole of Northern India except the Punjab had come under the control of the Nanda dynasty of Magadha. But the Punjab was the natural gateway to the Indian sub-continent. In 326 B.C., when Alexander's armies poured through the Kabul valley into India, Punjab was divided between a number of small kingdoms and republics, most of them at war with one another. In spite of the brave resistance of some of the units, the lack of unity enabled Alexander to over-



run the Punjab. What stopped further penetration was not only the homesickness of Alexander's soldiery, but also the realisation of the strength of the Magadhan empire.<sup>18</sup>

During this time of trouble, a strong man, Chandragupta, displaced the Nandas and founded the Mauryan dynasty.<sup>19</sup> He rose to power in 321 B.C. and the devastating raids by Alexander in the Punjab really helped him in the task of imperial unification by impressing upon the various scattered groups the need for unity. By his successful struggle against Seleucus, the great general and successor of Alexander in his Asiatic dominions, Chandragupta extended his realm still further to the west, up to Herat. Gradually, the Mauryan empire was able to extend its frontiers in the south also and by the time of Asoka (270-230 B.C.), the grandson of Chandragupta, the southern boundary of the realm was fixed along the Pennar river, approximately at the latitude of Nellore.

Memories of republican government and of constitutional monarchy faded away under the strong rule of Chandragupta and his great minister Chanakya. Monarchic absolutism was strengthened, probably as a response to the challenge of external threat. The principles and the administrative requirements of absolutism, among which latter was an efficient espionage network, were outlined thoroughly and without inhibitions by Chanakya, whose political thought includes impressive speculations on geopolitics, the concept of the world-conqueror and the idea of the world-state. If the regime was draconian, let us not forget that a strong and centralised administration was necessary to maintain the unity of the country. Asoka,<sup>20</sup> under the influence of Buddhism, realised that law and order were not ends in themselves, but only the necessary conditions which would enable the people to realise a moral life.<sup>21</sup> All the ingredients of a modern welfare state were present in his benevolent administration. But perhaps, as in the case of Ikhnaton of ancient Egypt, Asoka's idealism was premature for history. He realised that war was evil, but failed to realise that military preparedness was a necessary evil in a stage of history, characterised by vast, continental movements of great masses of people.

An essential, but not the complete, motivation of Chandragupta's espionage system was the security of his own house. Asoka



could not have paid sufficient attention to such a detail which must have appeared to him too gross and self-centered. This led ultimately to the collapse of the Mauryan house due to palace intrigues. The general, Pushyamitra Sunga, captured power. A striking parallel is the capture of power by the Seljuk army commanders from the Abbasid Caliphs in Islam. Just as the Seljuk revolt implied the restoration of Sunni orthodoxy as against the pro-Shia regime of the Abbasid Caliphs, the Sunga seizure of power represented the restoration of Brahmanical Hinduism in place of the Buddhism of the later Mauryas.

But the Sungas were not able to stabilise the empire. The Greeks from Bactria, the Parthians, the Sakas and the Kushanas poured in millions into India and established supremacy in the west and north-west, limiting the Sunga power to the south-east. In the first century A.D. the Kushanas, a Central Asian tribe akin to the Turks, were able to establish an empire under their leader Kanishka which included North India and Afghanistan. Kanishka became a staunch Buddhist and therefore hateful in the eyes of the Brahmanical faith. The rise to power of the Imperial Guptas<sup>22</sup> from 320 onwards can be regarded as the resumption of the trend towards the restoration of Brahmanical Hinduism which had been begun earlier by Pushyamitra but was interrupted by the Saka and Kushana interlude.

The Gupta empire dominated the whole of Northern India for nearly two centuries. After its downfall, mainly caused by the Huna invasions, successive attempts were made by Yasodharma (about 530), Sasanka (600), Harshavardhana (606-647), Yasovarman (about 700) and Lalitaditya (about 730) to build up an empire in Northern India. But the empires created by their military prowess did not survive their deaths. The Deccan was ruled first by the Chalukyas<sup>23</sup> (550-753) and then by the Rashtrakutas<sup>24</sup> (753-973). The Rashtrakutas tried to establish an empire in Northern India but met with resistance from the Palas<sup>25</sup> of Bengal and the Gurjara-Pratiharas.<sup>26</sup> The latter group was able to consolidate a realm extending from eastern Punjab to northern Bihar including parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat. Kanauj,<sup>27</sup> under the Gurjara-Pratiharas in the ninth century, became a symbol of resistance against the growing power of the Arabs who had established themselves in the north-west of the peninsular region of



India. But tragically, Kanauj also became the bone of contention between the Gurjara-Pratiharas, the Palas and Rashtrakutas. The last group occasionally allied themselves with the Arabs. This triangular contest lasted for nearly two hundred years (750-950) exhausting their energies and paving the way for the successful raids (1000-1030) of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, culminating in the Muslim conquest of the Punjab. The Sahi dynasty of the Punjab, under their king Trilochanapala, fought heroically against Ghazni but could not stem the tide and the king himself died in the field.

A respite of a century and a half followed and two dynasties, the Gahadavalas<sup>28</sup> of Kanauj and Banaras and the Chohans of Delhi, were able to build up powerful kingdoms. But they hated each other more than they hated the foreign invader and Prithvi Raj Chohan died fighting Muhammad Ghori while Jayachandra of Kanauj rejoiced over his fall. Thus, Hindu political power in Northern India was extinguished by the end of the twelfth century. The first Muslim power that thus established itself in India was the Turks. The Turkish Sultans of Delhi ultimately overran almost the whole of India. But a succession of palace intrigues and revolts leading to change of dynasties and finally the terrible invasion of Timur (1336-1405) broke their power and paved the way for the conquest of India by the Mughals, the descendants of Timur, in the sixteenth century.

Meanwhile, in the Deccan, the Rashtrakutas were supplanted by the later Chalukyas (973-1191) and after about two centuries, their dominions were divided among the Yadavas<sup>29</sup> of Devagiri and the Hoysalas<sup>30</sup> of Dorasamudra. Further south, the Pallavas<sup>31</sup> of Kanchi were the dominant power till the ninth century when their position was taken by the Cholas<sup>32</sup> of Tanjore. In the West coast, Chera power was able to maintain itself till it was smashed by the Cholas in the eleventh century. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, the southern states also felt the power of the Delhi Sultanate through the campaigns of Alauddin Khilji. Vijayanagar was able to maintain its autonomy from 1350 to 1565 but was at last crushed by a coalition of the Muslim sultanates of the Deccan. Nevertheless, Hindu power was not totally eclipsed even during the heyday of Muslim domination, under the Mughals. The Rajputs maintained their independence for a fairly long period



and never completely lost their internal autonomy. The Marathas maintained their authority in the Deccan from 1650 to 1818 in spite of many expeditions against them by the Mughal armies. When Mughal power began to decline, the Sikhs consolidated themselves and established political authority over the Punjab and Kashmir at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The arrival of Vasco da Gama at Calicut in 1498 opened the chapter of Western domination in India. The Portuguese were followed by the Dutch, the French and the English and the intrigues among native rulers enabled each of these powers to consolidate themselves for a time. But the British had greater staying power. The East India Company was formed in London in 1600 for trade with India and the East Indies. But the mercantile enterprise was rapidly transforming itself into a colonial adventure. As early as 1686, the Company announced its intention "to establish a large, wellgrounded, sure English dominion in India for all time to come".<sup>33</sup> It set up trading posts at Madras, Calcutta and Bombay, maintained an army, fought battles and exercised other functions of government. The defeat of the Marathas in 1818 and the Sikhs in 1849 completed the supremacy of the British in India. The revolution of 1857 was suppressed in blood but a positive outcome of that catastrophe was that the British Parliament took over the government from the East India Company. It is true that the British maintained the empire for their own advantage. But only blind prejudice can ignore the salutary long-term effects of the period of British occupation. For one thing, the past record of the native rulers does not suggest that the unification of the country would have been effected by agreement among themselves. This needed force and no one State in India could have mobilised the requisite power, because the technological level, which determines the fighting power, was the same for all the Indian states. Therefore, a foreign power from a continent, which had raced ahead in technological progress, was needed for the long-term purposes of history. Let us also not ignore the influence of British liberalism in the growth of the political movement in India, which culminated in the realisation of independence in 1947.



*II. Sciences and the Analytical Mind*

The genius of a race is, in one sense, indivisible. The level of achievement in different fields has to be related to the quality of the spirit that engages itself with different types of analytical or creative endeavour. Therefore, a short resumé of the achievements of the analytical mind of India may not be out of place before we launch ourselves on a study of a selected field of aesthetic achievement like literature.

In the Chhandogya Upanishad,<sup>34</sup> Rasi Vidya is mentioned as one of the sciences already mastered by Narada when he approached Sanat Kumara for higher instruction. Later, this science came to be known as Ganita and an old text<sup>35</sup> says: "As are the crests on the heads of peacocks, as are the gems on the hoods of snakes, so is the Ganita at the top of the sciences known as the Vedanga." Ganita during this period included arithmetic, algebra and astronomy. Geometry (Sulva) was also explored, but it was placed in a different group of sciences known as the Kalpa.<sup>36</sup>

The greatest contribution of Indian mathematics is the practice of writing large numbers where the place of the digit indicates its power as a multiple of ten. The original European method of writing a large number is to split it into tens, hundreds, thousands etc. Thus, for writing 1960 in Roman numerals, we give first the symbol for 1000, then for 900, then for 50 and lastly for 10. In the modern practice, the place of the digit indicates its power. Thus 1, occupying the fourth place to the left, indicates that it stands for 1000. This system is called the Arabic numeral because Europe obtained it from the Arabs. But it has been conclusively proved that the Arabs themselves obtained it from India. This numeral is found in the Edicts of Asoka (256 B.C.), a thousand years before its occurrence in the Arabic tradition. The great French mathematician, Laplace, has paid a glowing tribute to India for discovering this ingenious method which escaped the genius of Archimedes and Apollonius, the greatest mathematicians of ancient Greece.<sup>37</sup> India, likewise, was the first to use the zero as a mathematical symbol.<sup>38</sup>

Algebra was developed by the great astronomers, Aryabhata (born about 476), Brahmagupta (seventh century) and Bhaskara



(twelfth century). Algebraic symbols were freely used. Bhaskara invented many of them. These authorities discovered and used the concept of a negative quantity,<sup>39</sup> without which algebra would have remained very limited in its reach. The same poetic sensibility which made an old text use the imagery of the peacock's crest in referring to the high status of mathematics, made the Indian scientists write their treatises in poetic form and use concrete imagery. Here is an instance of how a problem in algebra is posed by Bhaskara in his *Lilavati*. "Eight rubies, ten emeralds and a hundred pearls, which are in thy ear-ring, my beloved, were purchased by me for thee at an equal amount, and the sum of the prices of a set of the three sorts of gems was less than half a hundred; tell me the price of each, auspicious woman."<sup>40</sup>

In geometry, a theorem which is associated in the European tradition with Pythagoras (6th century B.C.) seems to have been worked out by Baudhayana in about 800 B.C. The theorem is that the square of the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle equals the sum of the squares of the other two sides. Baudhayana enunciates it thus. "The diagonal of a rectangle produces both areas which its length and breadth produce separately."<sup>41</sup> That is, the square built up on the diagonal of a rectangle has an area equal to the sum of the areas of the squares which can be built up on its two sides separately. Aryabhata discovered the method of finding out the areas of a triangle, a trapezium and a circle. For relating the diameter to the circumference in a circle, the symbol of the Greek letter Pi is used in Western geometry. The product of the diameter and the value of this symbol gives the circumference. Aryabhata calculated its value as 3.1416, a figure not equalled in accuracy until the days of the mathematician Purbach (1423-61) in Europe.<sup>42</sup> As geometry is a very technical subject, we cannot go into further detail, but the Indian achievement has been demonstrated to be substantial.<sup>43</sup>

Astronomical studies date back to the Vedic period. The earth was known to be spherical in shape.<sup>44</sup> The Satapatha Brahmana states it expressly as a Parimandala (globe or sphere). The Rig Veda also asserts that the earth is suspended freely in the air.<sup>45</sup> There are also evidences of the knowledge of the axial rotation and the orbital motion of the earth in the Rig Veda.<sup>46</sup> The sun is known to be the maker of the day and night, dawn and



dusk, month and year and also the seasons.<sup>47</sup> The basis of meteorological phenomena in solar heat is also known, for the sun is described as the cause of winds.<sup>48</sup> It is clearly stated that the sun never really rises nor sets, day and night being determined by whether a specific region of the earth is facing the sun or facing away from it.<sup>49</sup> It is also said that the sun holds the earth and other heavenly bodies in their respective places by his mysterious power, a remarkable anticipation of the principle of gravitation. The moon shines by the borrowed light of the sun.<sup>50</sup>

There was a continuous line of students of astronomy, though it is difficult to determine their dates. All the systems that were thus elaborated were summarised by Varahamihira in his *Panchasiddhantika* in the sixth century.<sup>51</sup> He has included a summary of the *Surya Siddhanta*<sup>52</sup> also in this work. This is a very old text and scholars believe that Varahamihira himself was not able to get the full authentic text of the original. He also summarises the views of the great astronomer, Aryabhata. Aryabhata explained eclipses and equinoxes and long before the Renaissance in Europe clearly stated: "The sphere of the stars is stationary, and the earth, by its revolution, produces the daily rising and setting of planets and stars."<sup>53</sup> The most famous successor of Aryabhata and Varahamihira was Brahmagupta.<sup>54</sup> These Indian astronomers were able to calculate with remarkable accuracy the diameter of the moon, the eclipses of the moon and sun, the position of the poles and the position and motion of the major stars.<sup>55</sup> The Siddhantas echo the Vedic reference to the theory of gravitation. "The earth, owing to its force of gravity, draws all things to itself."<sup>56</sup>

Remarkable contributions were made in physics and chemistry also. Kanada, the founder of the Vaisesika system of philosophy, taught that the entire matter in the world was composed of atoms, as many in kind as the various elements. Kanada's atom would thus correspond to the atom as understood in modern science. Jain thinkers went further and held that all atoms were of the same kind and variety emerged because they entered into different forms of combination.<sup>57</sup> The Jain atom would thus correspond to the particles of which all atoms are composed. Kanada believed light and heat to be variations of the same reality, thus anticipating Clark Maxwell's electromagnetic theory which unified all forms



of radiant energy, including heat and light. Vachaspati interpreted light as composed of minute particles emitted by substances and striking the eye.<sup>58</sup> This is an anticipation of the corpuscular theory of light which was proposed by Newton but not accepted till the discovery of the proton, or particle of radiant energy. Patanjali (second century B.C.) the commentator on the grammar of Panini, was an authority on the science of iron also. The Iron Pillar of Delhi, erected about 400, is free from rust, though it has been exposed to wind and rain for fifteen centuries. Nagarjuna, who lived in the eighth or ninth century, is credited with the discovery of the processes of distillation and calcination. The properties of mercury were thoroughly investigated in India centuries before it was studied in Europe. By the twelfth century, India was using a large number of apparatus and instruments in chemical technology. The monumental research by P. C. Ray<sup>59</sup> has furnished comprehensive evidence of the Indian achievement in pure chemistry and industrial chemistry.

Botany was highly developed under the designation, Vrikshayurveda, the literal meaning of which is the "science of the life of plants". The science and its practitioners are referred to in the *Agni Purana*, *Brihat Samhita* and *Arthashastra*. We learn that the student of this science was to study the art of the collection and selection of seeds, selection of soil, sowing, the successful germination of seeds, the various means of propagation such as grafting and cutting, planting, manuring, rotation of crops, cultivation under various weather conditions, treatment of plants in health and disease, location of plants for improving the aesthetic and hygienic surroundings of the homestead, etc. Stiff tests were given to students in the collection and identification of plant specimens. Thus, Atreya, the famous teacher at the University of Taxila, asked his pupil Jivaka to collect, identify and describe the properties of all plants that were to be found within four *yojanas* of the university town.<sup>60</sup> Jivaka succeeded in this test and later rose to be the physician of king Bimbisara. The ascent and circulation of sap are discussed by Kanada,<sup>61</sup> Sankaramisra<sup>62</sup> and in the *Santiparva* of the *Mahabharata*. The *Santiparva* clearly states that plants manufacture their nutriment from the sap with the help of the sun's energy and a component (carbon dioxide) of air. "With the help of *agni* (solar energy) and air, this sap is digested,



prepared into food proper. And it is on account of the assimilation of this food that plants attain development." There were numerous specialists like Kasyapa and Bhattotpala who studied the etiology, diagnosis and treatment of plant diseases.

The most impressive achievement, however, seems to have been in the medical field. Ayurveda, or the science of longevity, is part of the Atharva Veda. There was a succession of brilliant men in this field, the most important among them being Sushruta who lived in the fifth century before Christ, Charaka of the second century after Christ, Vagbhata of the seventh century and Bhava Misra of the sixteenth century. Sushruta was essentially an authority on surgery and Charaka on medicine. Dissection was practised from very early times. Sushruta writes: "Whoever wishes to get a clear idea of surgery must prepare a corpse in the proper way and see by careful dissection every part of the body in order that he may have definite and certain knowledge."<sup>63</sup> Even in the fifth century B.C., Indian medical science shows detailed knowledge of the various tissues of the human body.<sup>64</sup> Atreya, about 500 B.C., outlined a theory that the parental seed is independent of the parent's body, and contains in itself, in miniature, the whole parental organism.<sup>65</sup> Weismann propounded the similar theory of the continuity of the germ plasm 2400 years later. Foetal development was described with remarkable accuracy. It was noted that the sex of the foetus remained for a time undetermined and it was claimed that in some cases the sex of the embryo could be influenced by food or drugs.<sup>66</sup> The science of eugenics is foreshadowed in the prohibition in the code of Manu against marrying persons affected with various diseases.<sup>67</sup> The germ or microbe theory of diseases was known to Sushruta. "All forms of leprosy and some skin diseases are due not only to the derangements of the bodily humours but also to microbes . . . There are various fine organisms which circulate in the blood and are invisible to the naked eye. Usually these look like round bodies of copper colour and are without limbs. They give rise to various diseases."<sup>68</sup> Vaccination seems to have been known to Indian science, as is clear from a sixth century text. "Take the fluid of the pock on the udder of the cow upon the point of a lancet and lance with it the arms between the shoulders and elbows until the blood appears; then mixing the fluid with the blood, the fever



of the small-pox will be produced.”<sup>69</sup> Anaesthesia seems to have been practised in surgery. Both Sushruta and Charaka mention the use of drugs to produce insensibility to pain. We have a record of an operation performed in 927 when two surgeons opened up the skull of a king and made him insensitive to the operation by administering a drug called Sammohini.<sup>70</sup> In Europe, Harvey discovered the circulation of the blood only in the seventeenth century. But we read in Charaka: “From that centre (the heart) emanate the vessels carrying blood into all parts of the body—the element which nourishes the life of all animals and without which life would be extinct. It is that element which goes to nourish the foetus in the womb and which, after flowing into its body, returns to the mother’s heart.”<sup>71</sup> As in ancient Egypt and Greece, hypnotism as therapy seems to have been practised in India also, the centres for this sort of treatment being the temples. According to one authority, the Englishmen who introduced hypnotherapy into England—Braid, Esdaile and Elliotson—“undoubtedly got their ideas, and some of their experience, from contact with India.”<sup>72</sup>

Perhaps the greatest contribution of Indian science is its humanism. These thinkers were aware of the fact that the baser instincts of man could creep into science and vitiate it. Charaka speaks of two types of doctors, one companions of death and destroyers of life and the other companions of life and destroyers of disease. There is a vitriolic pen-picture of the former type. When they hear the news of any one’s illness, they race thither like carrion birds, spread subtle propaganda about their cleverness and woo the relatives of the patient to get the case. The doctors dedicated to the science, however, think of nothing but service. “Because of their humane disposition and the virtues of their character, because of their abounding love for all living beings, they are like a father, mother, or brother.”<sup>73</sup> The noble ideal which the doctor should always keep before him is indicated by Charaka. “Not for money nor for any earthly objects should one treat his patients. In this the physician’s work excels all vocations. Those who sell treatment as a merchandise neglect the true treasure of gold in search of mere dust.” It is worth while noting that this ideal is much higher than that enunciated by Hippocrates, the great physician of ancient Greece. The Hippo-



cratic Oath which the European medical tradition has accepted as its motto stresses abstention from putting scientific knowledge to evil uses. "I will not give poison to anybody . . or aid abortion . . . I will abstain from all intentional wrongdoing and harm, especially from abusing the bodies of man or woman . . ." <sup>74</sup> The Indian scientist goes further and sets before science a positive ideal of dedicated service. "When the perfection of Rasa (mercury) is achieved, I shall make humanity free from decay and death." This ideal has been forgotten by modern science and the world may yet have to pay for the amnesia by self-immolation in an atomic war.

### *III. Arts and the Creative Sensibility*

The analytical mind explored the laws of the structure and behaviour of matter, inorganic and living, and used scientific knowledge to enable man to develop his capacities to the fullest extent. The creative capacities were thus enabled to blossom to their highest functional expression and India was able to build up great traditions in architecture, sculpture, painting, music and handicrafts.

It has been said that the Moghuls built like giants and carved like jewellers. The tribute is valid for the Hindu Period too, for great structures like the Kailasa temple at Ellora were hewn out of entire hills, while the carvings which decorate their pillars and other structural members have the delicacy of ivory work. The subcontinent reveals an incredible variety of architectural forms. In Buddhist times, cloisters grew around a central monument which contained sacred relics and the beautiful horse-shoe shaped portal of these Viharas has revealed itself to be capable of successful adoption by contemporary styles also, as in the case of the Vigyan Bhavan at Delhi. The Jains covered an entire mountain, the Satrunjaya hill, with temples and shrines at Palitana, and at Mount Abu, the roofs of their temples have been covered with decorative carving, which suggests more the art of the jeweller than that of the mason. Hindu religious architecture gave us vast pillared halls and soaring towers while the secular architecture has given us the massive fortresses of the Rajputs, structured on austere functional lines. The great styles of Indian architecture



crossed the seas to inspire the traditions of Ceylon, Cambodia (Indo-China) and Java. There are innumerable treatises on architecture like the *Kamikagama*, *Vastu Tattva*, *Vastu Prabandha* and the *Silpa Sastra Samgraha*.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps the most comprehensive among them is the *Manasara*.<sup>76</sup> In this great work, the term architecture is taken in its broadest sense, including town-planning as the most comprehensive expansion of the concept, and architectural sculpture as a decorative adjunct of the art of building. The theory of the construction of individual structures is preceded in this text by an elaborate treatment of village and town-planning and all the cognate subjects such as laying out gardens, constructing market-places, ports and harbours, making roads, bridges, gateways and triumphal arches, digging wells, tanks, drainages, etc. Technical details have been given for every type of civil, religious and military construction. This thorough treatise goes on to include not only furniture but dress and personal ornament. In giving advice regarding construction, impressive scientific data have been provided on the significance of ground and atmospheric conditions, the nature of the soil and the gradient of the terrain, sunshine, temperature, humidity, wind-direction, etc.

The aesthetics of architecture is not additive. It consists in streamlining the functional form for a specific aesthetic appeal. From the functional point of view, the Greek temple, the Romanesque church and the Gothic cathedral, all served their purposes equally well. But the differences in the ratio between base and height create different aesthetic appeals. The Greek temple hugs the earth and reflects the clear realism of the Greek mind. The height increases proportionately in the Romanesque structure which therefore reflects the desire to impress with a sense of power. The Gothic cathedral soars up like a prayer. The *Manasara* clearly shows that this aesthetic principle of architectural form was clearly understood in India also. Buildings have been categorised on the basis of the proportions of height and the names given to the categories are significant, because they clearly reveal that the aesthetic values were clearly grasped. When the height is equal to the breadth, the category is *Santika* or restful. When the height is one and one-fourth of the breadth of the base, it is *Paushtika* or strong, when it is one and a half times,



it is Jayada or victory-yielding, when it is one and three fourths, it is Dhanada or wealth-giving. The last category where the height is twice the breadth is called Adbhuta, or marvellous.

Equally great is the tradition in sculpture. The terra-cotta figures of men and animals from Mohenjo Daro show a vigorous realism which we find again in the Ramapurva bull of the Mauryan period. Buddhist spirituality and the Greek love of physical perfection blended in Gandhara art to create a style at once serene and vigorous. At Bharhut and elsewhere, the Buddhist inspiration gave to low-relief sculpture a racy narrative power in illustrating the Jataka stories and episodes from the life of Siddhartha. The Gupta period, along with the great refinement of secular culture which it achieved, also realised a profoundly spiritual quality in its sculptures of the Buddha. Masterpieces of Hindu religious sculpture, like the Trimurti of Elephanta and the bronze Nataraja of South India deepened this spirituality with a high symbolic power. That the order of the universe is not static, that it is a dynamic rhythm realised in a flux, which thus becomes a process, a cyclical movement of evolution and dissolution, have been expressed in the Nataraja where the plastic form realises the symbolic meaning perfectly.

Meanwhile, the world and its beauty were not being neglected. The wood nymphs of Mathura, voluptuous damsels relaxing under flowering Asoka trees or bathing in waterfalls, the love-lorn maiden penning a letter to her absent lover in Khajuraho and the bronze goddesses of the south are exquisite homages in sculpture to the beauty of woman. In medieval Bengal and elsewhere, terra-cotta sculpture covered entire temples with a narration of sacred and secular lore. In all these traditions, each region of India was able to develop its own distinctive style.

With a continuity of more than two thousand years, Indian painting is one of the finest traditions in the world heritage. Ajanta is its first magnificent efflorescence. The mural tradition of Ajanta fertilised the art of Afghanistan, Ceylon, Tibet, China and Japan. Gracious Bodhisattva figures, reincarnating the idiom of Ajanta, can be seen even today at Bamiyan in Afghanistan, Sigiriya in Ceylon, Tung Huang in China and Horiyuji in Japan. In India, the mural tradition continued right up to the end of the nineteenth century. But a great parallel tradition was also



developing in the meantime. The style and idiom descended from the walls to palm leaf manuscripts in Gujarat and Pala period Bengal. Indian manuscript illustration was fertilised by Persian painting with the advent of the Moghuls and the Rajput school that thus arose proliferated into various regional styles in Rajputana and in the principalities which the Rajput warriors set up in the Himalayan foothills. The Vaishnavite faith became a great stimulus and many of the Rajput miniatures recapture the lyricism of the love of Krishna and the Gopis, gracious symbols of God, the beloved, and the human soul which seeks him with a poignant yearning.

Strong foundations of the theory of painting were also laid early. The famous Six Canons (Shadanga or six limbs) of painting are first mentioned in a Sanskrit couplet of unknown date, quoted by Yasodhara, again of undetermined date, in his commentary on the *Kamasutra* (Science of Erotics) of Vatsyayana, a work which may date back to the third century A.D. The first of the six principles is Rupa-Bhedah. Rupa Goswami in his *Ujjvala Nilamāni* defines Rupam as the intrinsic beauty of forms. "That something is called Rupam by virtue of which the limbs undecorated by any ornaments appear as if they are actually bedecked with ornaments." Rupam, therefore, means the inherent natural beauty of visible forms and is brought out by the skilful manipulation of the line which effects Bhedah or differentiation of contours. The form reaches its full aesthetic power with this clear definition of contours. The second principle, Pramanam, covered the rules of proportion which included not only those relating to length, breadth and thickness, but also the disappearance (kshaya) and appearance (vridhi) of forms in foreshortening. The third criterion is Bhavam which means the external, physical transformation reflecting a change in the inner mood. Indian art has always emphasized the supreme importance of emotion. The fourth category, Lavanya, is defined in the old texts as that which is revealed by the members of the body, like the liquid lustre emanating from pearls. While Rupam refers to the rhythm and beauty of forms, Lavanya refers to the beauty of texture and plastic quality of the masses. The fifth principle, Sadrisyam, means verisimilitude, or the registration of an appearance as given. The last of the six principles is Varnika Bhanga which indicates the



correct application and disposition of colour. It is important to recall that this formulation migrated with the styles of painting to foreign lands as well and was the basis of the theory of the six canons of painting outlined by Hsieh Ho, the famous Chinese painter of the sixth century.

Considerable work has been done on the various schools of Indian painting. But a thorough research is yet to be initiated regarding the old material on the theory of painting. It can be stated with confidence that many pleasant surprises await us in this field. For instance, the pure landscape is rare in what has survived of older painting. But we find that the *Chitra Sutra* or section on painting in the *Vishnu Dharmottara Purana*,<sup>77</sup> a work belonging to the fifth or sixth century, gives elaborate instructions on landscape painting. It lays down that in painting the six seasons, summer has to be associated with a deep pool, languid men, deer seeking the shade of trees and buffaloes wallowing in mud. The rainy season is indicated by a sky occasionally beautified by the rainbow, but more often overcast with rain clouds through which the lightning flashes, birds perched on trees and wild animals taking shelter in caves. In autumn the trees are to be shown with heavy loads of fruits, the earth covered with ripening corn fields and the tanks beautified by lotuses and swans. The landscape at the approach of winter has frosty horizon, harvested fields and the ground moist with dew drops. In winter, the sky is covered with heavy fog and men are shown shivering with the cold.

The Vedic Aryans with their poetic sensibility felt that the song was the best offering to the creator of the loveliness and grace of this world. The *Sama Veda* laid the foundation of the musical tradition. Krishna says in the *Gita*. "Of the Vedas I am the *Sama Veda*." That is, devotion is the finest flower of knowledge and the song is the finest fruit of the ardent spirit. The *Raga* system that evolved in India is one of the most important musical systems of the world. Basic to it is a profound perception of the specific emotional qualities of different melodic moulds, explored to the finest nuances. In Bharata's treatise on drama-turgy<sup>78</sup> we find the harmonious combination of concept, speech, expression and music, both vocal and instrumental. There is a splendid succession of monumental research treatises on music

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like Narada's *Sangita Makaranda* of the ninth century, Sarangadeva's *Sangita Ratnakara* of the thirteenth century, Ahobila's *Sangita Parijata* and Ramamatya's *Svara Mela Kalanidhi*, both of the sixteenth century and Govinda Dikshita's *Sangita Sudha*, Somnath's *Raga Vibodha* and Venkatamakhi's *Chaturdandi Prakasika*, all of the seventeenth century. The devotional cult spread throughout the length and breadth of the country on the wings of music, for every region produced saint singers, like Tukaram of Maharashtra, Chaitanya of Bengal and Thyagaraja of South India.

Indian handicrafts were popular throughout the ancient world. Sir Aurel Stein, the archaeologist, came across ancient printed cottons of India in Central Asia. Pliny, the Roman writer of the first century A.D., voiced a strong protest against the extravagance of his fellow citizens which sent the equivalent of Rs. 2 crores yearly from Rome to India for her silks, brocades, muslins and cloths of gold. In the Ramayana, we read that among the citizens who went out into the forest with Bharata in search of Rama were gem-cutters, potters, weavers, ivory-makers and famous goldsmiths. Along the Uttara Patha, or Northern Route, one of the most important trade routes of antiquity, which started from Pataliputra (Patna) and went past Purushapura (Peshawar), some of the finest specimens of Indian ivory work travelled to Afghanistan and are cherished today in the Kabul Museum. Lastly, there was a free interchange of ideas between fine arts like sculpture and painting and craft lines, regarding designs. For, in an old text like *Nisitachurni*, we read the definite statement that craft designs regularly accepted cues from the fine arts.

With such a rich background of achievement in art, the ideal of the aesthete took shape very early. Even in the Vedas we find that, although the songs are noted as rising spontaneously from the heart, the critical sensibility consciously evaluates them and finds them aesthetically satisfying. The word *Rasa* (aesthetic emotion) is found in the Vedas themselves. The highest experience is the realisation of the unity with the Real Existence that is the ground of the phenomenal existence of the world. Later aesthetic theory took a cue from this and approximated the bliss of aesthetic experience to this transcendental experience. Sensibility was the basic requisite for aesthetic experience. The man of taste or



Sahrdaya is gifted with the same sensibility as the poet who creates a poem. Appreciation is not far different from creation, for the man of sensibility participates anew in the creative aesthetic process. The concept of the Sahrdaya is a very important contribution of the Indian tradition.

The word for civilization in Sanskrit is associated with the town and city (nagara). The Nagaraka in Sanskrit means the cultured urban individual. The Nagaraka was expected to be trained in sixty-four Kalas or accomplishments. These include literature, singing, dancing and acting, architecture, flower-arrangement and various handicrafts. Kama, or the refined pursuit of love and pleasure, was accepted as one of the legitimate ends of man within a framework which gave equal stress to social responsibility and finally spiritual self-realisation. Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra*<sup>79</sup> gives us the ideal of the Nagaraka. Surprisingly enough, he is not an irresponsible bachelor, but a married man. His wife is the presiding deity of the household. She should keep the house clean, make it bright and polished, pleasing to the eye, decorate it with flowers, maintain a clean shrine for the gods where she shall make offerings morning, noon and evening. When going out, she should have only a few ornaments, should not use too much perfumes or make-up and should wear a plain, simple silk dress and white flowers. The Nagaraka is obviously a man of means. He has a house, big or small according to his means. It is close to a sheet of water and has garden attached. "In the garden there should be a swing, well covered and under the shade of a tree, as also an earthen platform strewn with the falling flowers of the garden." He has a salon for receiving his friends. "On the wall, there should be hanging from a bracket, a Vina. The room should have a painting canvas, paint-box, some favourite books and flower garlands." The evening is devoted to social calls and recreations like attending music concerts and dance performances. "He should arrange excursions in parties for attending festivals, salons for enjoying art and literature, wine parties, excursions to parks and group games." This round of pleasures was incomplete without the presence of woman. She not only participated in the excursions and parties but also actively contributed to the discussions on art and literature. In this urban culture, the courtesan was expected to have mastered the



sixty-four disciplines like her cultured patrons.

The mental background of the Nagaraka is definitely urban and sophisticated. The concept of the Sahrdaya is deeper and has a greater range. The influence of the Nagaraka has been very great in the Sanskrit literary tradition and has tended to make its main currents sophisticated. The fact that the language itself was one developed by the most cultured stratum of the social hierarchy reinforced this tendency. This will be further clarified when we discuss the Sanskrit language. All this tended to make the bulk of the literary output a courtly tradition. But we should keep in mind two important features. If a pervasive urban culture made every cultured person try his hand at poetry, thus shifting the accent in literary effort from originality and profound inspiration to scholarship and skill, this culture also safeguarded the literary output from falling below a certain level, because of its insistence on good taste. Historic parallels are the Latin poetry of the age of Catullus and Ovid and the Arabic poetry of the Abbasid Caliphate at Baghdad. Secondly, the profounder ideal of the Sahrdaya, who could feel with men and women and indeed all created things in the variety and depth of their experience, was also continuously active. It deepened the shallow streams which originated in a purely urban culture till they swelled their volume and sped with momentum to the horizons where what counted was not merely urban refinement, but the genuine and spontaneous feeling of men and women interacting with the whole strength of their being with each other and the external contexts of their lives.

#### IV. Sanskrit Language and Tradition

The Aryans belong to the Indo-European group of races and Sanskrit thus belongs to the Indo-European group of languages. The closest affinity is with the Avestic, the language of the earliest sacred literature of the ancient Iranians. By the mere application of phonetic laws, whole stanzas of the Avesta may be translated word for word into Vedic, so as to produce verses correct not only in form, but in poetic spirit.

Three main stages are clearly distinguishable in the history of Sanskrit: Vedic, Epic and Classic. The Vedic language itself is



not uniform. The most archaic stratum is found in the oldest hymns of the Rig Veda. The later hymns, especially of the other Vedas, belong to the next phase and the Vedic prose works like the Brahmanas show the latest phase of Vedic Sanskrit. Epic Sanskrit is the language of the great popular epic histories, Ramayana and Mahabharata, and classical Sanskrit is the language of the Kavyas or epic poems.

Any language shows several strata, distinguished by the texture of the vocabulary, rigour or relaxation of grammatical rules and other features, and this stratification broadly reflects the stratification of the society itself which uses the language. Education needs leisure which depends on affluence. Therefore, in the early stages, literature in almost all languages reflects the language stratum of the upper classes. A folk tradition may grow up as a parallel movement, but it does not get incorporated into literature till literacy spreads to the masses. Now, the degree of the interaction between the language stratum of the masses and that of the upper classes varies considerably according to social conditions. Today, since literacy and culture have become fairly pervasive throughout the social mass, even slang is freely used in literature. But this was not the case in the past. Further, in the case of religious literature, there is a tendency for the priestly language to stand apart from the language of even the upper classes. The history of the Sanskrit language is an extreme instance of this type of restricted evolution.

The Vedic language which we find in the Rig Veda is already a priestly and poetical language which must have been different even from the speech of the priests themselves in ordinary life and still further removed from that of the upper classes, while the gulf between it and the popular speech must have been very wide. It is possible that the spoken language of the priestly classes differed from the language of the hymns only to a small extent, probably in the absence of poetical constructions and archaisms. But the other strata must have differed widely from the priestly stratum. This is not mere speculation. The Atharva Veda, which came into greater contact with the masses than the other three Vedas, because it dealt with charms and spells and other popular traditions in black magic, contains numerous words which stand out distinctly from the priestly vocabulary. As early



as in the sixth century B.C., the Buddha (563-483 B.C.) who wanted his teaching to reach the masses, rejected the language of the learned and used the popular language, one of the Prakrit dialects that was used in Magadha and was known as Ardha Magadhi though in the Buddhist tradition it was called Pali.

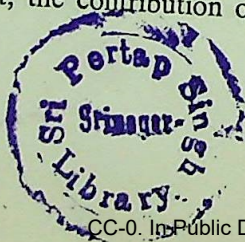
Yaska (fifth century B.C.), Panini (fourth century B.C.), Katyayana (third century B.C.) and Patanjali (second century B.C.) reveal that the hieratic language itself was becoming rapidly differentiated. Thus Yaska and Panini mention the peculiarities of the Easterners and Northerners, Katyayana refers to local divergences, and Patanjali gives specific words used in single districts only. The differentiation of the language stratum of the upper classes from the popular speech begins as an unconscious evolution. But it is stabilised by the conscious research and theoretical formulations of grammarians. The influence of the grammarians became decisive in the case of Sanskrit from a very early phase of the evolution of the language. Panini, who was born in Salatura, a suburb of Taxila, gave the language its first great classic of grammar in the *Ashtadhyayi*. It is a metrical composition and gives rules for pronunciation, based on a scientific analysis of how the various sounds are produced by the vocal organs, and rules for reciting the Vedas. He prescribes a careful scheme for the euphonic combination of the words within the sentence or a line of verse. He lays down the norm for the spoken language, Bhasha, in the higher circles of society. Since this norm does not conform precisely to any texts which are preserved to us, Panini was clearly creating a norm, though he was basing it closely on the hieratic language as it had taken shape at the close of the Vedic age.

But grammarians cannot create a language. It is a living thing which goes on evolving, like the life of the people whose medium of expression it is. Thus, we find that, in spite of Panini's stabilisation, the growth of the language in a few generations needs fresh efforts at systematisation. Katyayana (Vararuchi) therefore takes up the task again in his *Vartika* or Notes on Panini. Fresh modifications were necessary because regional differentiation had to be taken into account. Panini belonged to the West, while Katyayana was born at Kausambi near Allahabad. In the second century B.C., Patanjali had to take up the work once



Bengali from Magadhi and Marathi from Maharashtri may not be wrong. But the scheme needs to be corrected to allow for the original dialects of tribes like Abhiras and Gurjaras. For instance, these two tribes entered India about 150 B.C., settled down first in the Peshawar area and later spread, most to Gujarat. When they became civilised enough to feel the urge for creating literature, they used Prakrit dialects like Maharashtri and Sauraseni as a base, but introduced numerous words from their own dialects as well. Keith thinks that Apabhramsa evolved as a result of this fusion<sup>82</sup> and it spread over a wide region because the Abhira and Gurjara princes were able to consolidate their power from Gujarat to Bihar.

The problem of the origin of the modern Indian languages is a very fascinating one, but it cannot be pursued here. What is relevant to our purpose is the fact that even in the period after 1000, when the modern Indian languages began to emerge as literary vehicles, the influence of Sanskrit was in no way diminished, although there was a change in the form of that influence. If the cultured people began to compose increasingly in the regional languages, the great majority of them derived their inspiration from the Sanskrit tradition, many of them wrote in Sanskrit also in addition to the vernacular, and the bulk of the early literature in all these languages is mostly translation of Sanskrit classics. Even for original compositions, the themes were drawn from the great Sanskrit epics and concepts about literary form and literary evaluation were a legacy from Sanskrit. Sanskrit powerfully influenced even the Dravidian group of languages and the texture of Telugu, Kanarese and Malayalam is today indistinguishable from that of Bengali or Marathi as far as the Sanskrit derivation of the bulk of the vocabulary is concerned. If Tamil resisted the Sanskritisation of its alphabet, we must recall that Agastya who lived in the second century B.C. and his disciple who wrote the *Tolkappiyam*, took ample inspiration from Yaska, Panini and Indra Dutta in laying the foundations of Dravidian grammar and rhetoric. Further, the eighth century works of Jains in Tamil, like the *Sri Purana*, *Nilakesi*, *Samaya Divakara*, etc., use as highly Sanskritised a language as the Manipravalam works of Malayalam. Above all, even if the Tamil language resisted dominance by Sanskrit, the contribution of Tamilnad to Sanskrit studies has in





no way been less than that of any other region.

With the consolidation of Muslim power in North India, Persian became a formidable rival to Sanskrit for the patronage of the Imperial court. But we must not forget that Akbar and that ill-fated son of Shah Jahan, Dara Shikoh, were great patrons of Sanskrit. Bairam Khan, the Great Khan (Khan Khanan) who was the general of Akbar, was also a Sanskrit scholar. Further, the competition of Persian was felt only in the Moghul court. The culture of most of the vassal states was Hindu and every dynasty patronised Sanskrit.

With the advent of English education and later the technical orientation of education, Sanskrit slowly tended to become a specialised subject of study rather than a normal element of the culture of the educated classes. But, as Raghavan<sup>83</sup> has shown, compositions in Sanskrit in every literary form continue to be produced. Some of the writers have successfully recovered the simple, effective Pre-Bana style of the early Bhashyas (commentaries), early drama and fable literature.



## CHAPTER TWO

# Life Mirrored In Vedic Literature

## *I. Contours of the Material*

THE VEDIC literature of India has sometimes been claimed to be the most ancient literature in the world. This claim is not tenable, for Mesopotamian and Egyptian literatures are definitely prior to the Vedas. But the Vedas still remain the oldest literature of all the Indo-European races taken together.

Etymologically, the word Veda means knowledge and in later times, came to mean, more specifically, sacred knowledge. The basic texts are the four Samhitas or compilations of metrical hymns or Mantras. Mantra means that which is thought out by the mind and the sage or Muni is the person who is capable of that deep absorption of the mind which leads to the formulation of the Mantra.

The four compilations are the Rig Veda, the Sama Veda, the Yajur Veda and the Atharva Veda. Of these, the earliest is the Rig Veda. It consists of over ten thousand stanzas grouped into over thousand hymns collected in ten cycles or Mandalas. The Rig Vedic hymns are a poetic testament of a people's collective reaction to the wonder and awe of existence. They are poems of praise to the beauty of the earth and the powers glimpsed behind the radiant veil of nature, rather than ritual hymns, strictly.

But, as ritualistic religion developed, the need for a hymn which could be sung, besides the purely poetic poem, was felt. This was the origin of the second compilation, the Sama Veda. Saman means song or melody. All but seventy-five of its 1875 verses are borrowed from the Rig Veda, chiefly from the eighth and ninth Mandalas. The recited poem becomes here a hymn sung.

The third compilation, the Yajur Veda, arose later than the Rig Veda and the Sama Veda. These two belong to the period when the Aryans were living in the region watered by the Indus and its tributaries. But all the geographical references in the



Yajur Veda suggest an eastern shift. The Kurukshetra region, lying between the Sutlej and the Jamuna, and the Panchala region from Meerut to Allahabad, lying between the Jamuna and the Ganges, were the background of that growth of the Brahmanical ritual religion, one of the most important products of which was the Yajur Veda. The Yajus means a sacrificial formula. Most of its approximately 2,000 Mantras are in prose. These formulas have not, as a rule, the form of prayers addressed to the gods, but on the whole and characteristically consist of statements about the result of employing particular rites and Mantras.

In the tribal phase of all the Indo-European races, the chieftain also officiated as the priest at civic ceremonies and rituals. It is conjectured that this was the practice among the Aryans also in the beginning. The later nomination of another individual for the priestly function was the historical first step which ended up in the development of a ritualistic religion and the emergence of a priestly class for officiating at these rituals. At first, there was only one sacrificial fire, in front of which the Hotr priest recited the hymns of the Rig Veda. Later a second fire was added, officiated by the Udgatr priest who sang the Saman chant. Later still, a third fire was added, officiated by the Adhvaryu priest who recited the formulas of the Yajur Veda.

The fourth compilation, the Atharva Veda, was not originally recognised as having the canonical status of the other three Vedas. It grew up when the Adhvaryu priest began to cater to the masses and produce spells of magic and sorcery directed against diseases, enemies, demons. There are about 6000 such Mantras in this Veda. Its late origin is shown by the fact that the tiger, a native of marshy Bengal and unknown to the other Vedas, is frequently referred to as the terrible beast of prey that endangers human life.

The Mantras of all four compilations were handed down first in the oral tradition. A discipline, probably unique in the history of literature, arose very early, by which priests had to memorise the Mantras in correct diction and pronunciation through several methods of recitation which dealt with the words separately, linked each word with the preceding or following word and stabilised a faultless sequence by difficult but thorough practices of memorising. But the compilations themselves took place after the hymns had been in existence for several centuries. Therefore, we should



not be surprised if we frequently come across atypical material in any compilation. Thus, the Rig Veda contains magical spells that we usually associate with the Atharva Veda which, likewise, has some glorious hymns to Varuna and Bhumi (Earth) that are untainted by any suggestion of sorcery and recover the pure poetry of the Rig Veda.

The sacred stratum of Vedic literature includes the Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads in addition to the hymns, formulae and spells. The word Brahmana means the explanation of the Brahmin or learned priest upon a point of ritual. The Brahmanas are prose works interspersed with metrical pieces which give the rule or precept for rituals and explanations, whether exegetical, mythological or polemical, of the rules. They contain cosmogonic myths, legends and narratives that have reference to the sacrificial cult. Though the land of the Kurus and the Panchalas is still the centre of Brahmanical religion, it is clear that, during the period of the Brahmanas, it had spread to the countries to the east of Madhyadesa, to Kosala with its capital, Ayodhya (Oudh) and to Videha (northern Bihar) with its capital, Mithila. The Brahmanas thus are later than the Rig Veda and the Sama Veda but contemporaneous with the Yajur Veda. This is to be expected because like the Yajur Veda, they also have ritual as their main theme. Brahmanas are attached to all the four Vedas, but this grouping and allocation have not much significance and could be an accident of later compilation. In the Yajur Veda, the Brahmanas are found mixed up with the ritual formulae. Only one section of that Veda, the Vajasaneyi Samhita, is free from this mixture and therefore that section has been called the Shukla (well-arranged) Yajur Veda, while the remaining sections of the compilation are grouped together as Krishna (unarranged) Yajur Veda.

In the form in which we have obtained them, the Aranyakas and Upanishads are not easily distinguishable from the Brahmanas, for they have been presented as the concluding portions of some of the Brahmanas. For instance, the concluding section of the Taittiriya Brahmana is the Taittiriya Aranyaka. This Aranyaka has ten chapters of which only the first six form the Aranyaka proper. Chapters seven, eight and nine form the Taittiriya Upanishad and chapter ten forms the Yajnika (or Mahanarayana)



Upanishad. The Isa Upanishad, likewise, is really the fortieth chapter of the Yajur Veda. The Mandukya Upanishad is a very short prose work. There is an extraordinary philosophical treatise, the Karika of Gaudapada, which has four parts, the first of which is a metrical rendering of the entire Mandukya Upanishad. The Karika itself is sometimes regarded as four Upanishads in one. These eccentricities of compilation and classification are one of the greatest hurdles of the student of Vedic literature. The earlier Upanishads are prior to Buddhism but there are several belonging to the post-Buddhist period.

If the texts of the Aranyakas and the Upanishads are continuous with the Brahmanas, their spirit is not. In the Rig Veda there were sublime poetic homages to the powers intuited behind natural phenomena as well as philosophical speculations on the nature of the universe and the meaning of life. The poetic homages later crystallised into ritual worship and were elaborated by the priests into a complex sacerdotal religion. The Brahmanas show this trend. The philosophical enquiry developed, in the main with an anti-ritualistic bias, and yielded the profound speculations that we find in the Aranyakas and Upanishads. Aranyakas mean forest-texts, because these thinkers retired from the ritual-dominated society to the peace of forests where they were free to pursue their adventure of thought. The term Upanishad, likewise, means the sitting down (of the pupil) near (the teacher, for a confidential communication) and the progressive evolution of the meaning made the Upanishad a sacred session or sacred doctrine. But here again, the vagaries of compilation should be kept in mind. Some Upanishads commit themselves to ritualism while some Brahmanas contain exalted philosophical speculation.

Orthodox tradition groups the Vedic Mantras, Brahmanas and Aranyakas as revelation or *Śruti*. This sacred knowledge is not supposed to be the creation of any human mind. It exists in its complete form from eternity and dawns in the mind of the sage at the height of his contemplation. A theory of the Vedas existing eternally as subtle sound was elaborated which has remarkable affinities with the concept of the Logos in Greek philosophy and in the early Christian philosophy influenced by Neo-Platonism. We may also recall that the Hebrew and Islamic traditions show similar beliefs about the Old Testament and the Koran. As far



as the Vedas are concerned, we may note that the name of the sage who composed it is given with every hymn. The hymns thus are the fruits of the inspiration of individuals. About the transcendental source from which all inspiration wings its flight to seek expression through the minds of particular, gifted individuals, no definitive comment need be expected in a work of this type.

All the ancillary traditions, which grew up around the Vedas, have been grouped together as Smṛiti, (literally, tradition or memory) composed by human authors as contrasted with the Śrutis with their transcendental origin. The Smṛiti texts are broadly classified into six Vedāṅgas, limbs or auxiliary sciences of the Vedas. Special manuals giving Sūtras or extremely condensed aphorisms emerged in course of time for each specialised discipline. It is clear that the style and manner of the Sūtra literature developed out of the Brahmanas. The Vedāṅga which is closest to ritualistic religion is represented by the Kalpa Sūtras, the whole body of aphorisms giving instructions regarding ritual and religious morality. That part of the Kalpa Sūtras which deals with the rituals, like the establishment of the three sacred fires, mentioned in the Vedas or Śruti, is called Śrauta Sūtras. The second part of the Kalpa Sūtras is the Gṛhya Sūtras. It deals with domestic rituals and is of later origin, as domestic rituals are not mentioned in the Brahmanas. It gives the rules for numerous ceremonies and rituals that confer a higher sanctity on the domestic life of man and his family from birth to death and is a mine of information on popular customs. The third branch of the Kalpa Sūtras is one of still later evolution and is represented by the Dharma Sūtras which deal with secular as well as religious law. The Sulva Sūtras, containing rules for the measurement and the building of the place of sacrifice and the fire altars, are found as supplements to the Śrauta Sūtras and are the oldest works on Indian mathematics, showing quite an advanced knowledge of geometry. The other five Vedāṅgas are phonetics, grammar, etymology, metrics and astronomy.

## *II. Life-View*

Since the history of the Aryans became part of Indian history ever since their entry to India, we have the tendency to regard the



culture built up by them as the first phase, and inevitably a primitive phase, of the Indian civilization. This is to overlook the very important facts that the concept of civilization indicates a vaster and more inclusive continuity, that several cultures can become the simultaneous or successive components of a civilization and that these cultures need not necessarily be regarded as primitive merely because of their earlier date. The culture of the Vedic Aryans spanned at least one and a half millennia. The duration of the Greek or Roman civilizations was not longer by any means. In economic and social life, in conceptual thought and creative art, the Vedic culture shows a development from humble beginnings to high levels of achievement. The decline begins when a religion which began in poetic wonder hardened into formal ritual, when a society with a simple occupational stratification petrified into a system of hereditary castes between which there was no social mobility. The revolution effected by the Buddha was aimed at the hardened ritualism as well as the petrified caste-system. It thus marks the close of a culture. The fact that the protestantism of the Buddha went back to the purer earlier tradition only means that civilization periodically renews itself by accepting inspiration from earlier cultures. But the Vedic culture had described its complete circle of growth and decline by the fifth century B.C. The spirit of that culture, of course, lived on in innumerable prolongations, like the inspiration of Greek culture in European civilization.

Basic to all cultural expressions of a race, determining their quality and specificity, is its life-view.<sup>1</sup> The dark suspicion that the entrancing beauty of this world might be as false as a mirage does appear in Vedic culture. But this happens only very late. Throughout the vigorous, ascending phase of their culture, the Vedic Aryans frankly accepted the world and life. "This world is the most beloved of all," says the Atharva Veda.<sup>2</sup> And the Rig Veda says at one place. "There is no waiting for a world to come. We must be happy here and now. Make us today enjoyers of wide room and happiness!"<sup>3</sup> The Aryan mind did not try to forget or ignore death. The sober realism of their outlook comes out in the recognition that death is the "comrade", the unseen companion, of the race of man.<sup>4</sup> The term "comrade" suggests a manly, undisturbed attitude towards death, untainted



by fantasy or fear. What they pray for, in the beginning, is relief from premature death. When the melody of life was completed, they were perfectly willing to leave the concert hall of life. But the unfinished song seemed tragically unfair. "Let not my thread of life be snapped while I am weaving my song, nor the measure of my work broken up before its time," prays a Vedic poet to Varuna.<sup>5</sup> They prayed for life for a hundred autumns, life with its full powers, with sight and hearing, the strength of the arms and the keenness of the mind, unimpaired.<sup>6</sup> When their own sons had become fathers in their turn, they were ready to go.<sup>7</sup>

They faced life and its problems with courage and manly resoluteness. "Stand erect!", exhorts the Rig Veda.<sup>8</sup> "Quit yourself like heroes!", urges the Atharva Veda.<sup>9</sup> "Gods befriend none except those who have been tired . . . They do not like indolent sleep," reiterates the Rig Veda.<sup>10</sup> "Indra is the friend of those who move on," says the Aitareya Brahmana. The Aryans prayed to the gods for succour. But the prayer was a manly appeal. "Strong, I invoke thee, the Strong, O Thunderer!"<sup>11</sup>

Tribal unity was the basic requirement for survival, especially in the early phase of the conquest of new lands. "The river full of stones flows on. Move together, my comrades! Walk erect and cross it!"<sup>12</sup> In that tumultuous phase of the vast migrations of races over continents, the Aryans were a warlike people and their weapon was their beloved. A Rig Vedic poem on the bow brings out this trait. "As if desirous of whispering tender secrets, she presses close to the ear, holding her beloved friend in her embrace. Strained on the bow, the bow-string whispers like a young woman—this bow-string that preserves the warrior in the battle."<sup>13</sup> We get a fine picture of the warrior, with the taut bow-string pulled back to the level of his ear, the arrow ready to fly. When the conflict is over, along with the feeling of thankfulness for survival dawns an intuition of the beauty and fertility of the earth. "O Earth, pleasant by thy hills and snow-clad mountains and thy woodlands! On the earth—brown, black, ruddy and of all colours—the firm earth, the earth protected by Indra, upon this earth, I, unconquered, unslain, unwounded, have set my foot."<sup>14</sup> They found that the gracious earth had provided them ample bounties. The river Indus, when once it was crossed, became a great moat protecting their land. It brought fertility to the soil. "With



nourishing waves it rushed forth, a stronghold and fortress for us. Like a fighter in his chariot, the stream flows on, overtaking all others. It flows with pure water from the mountains to the sea. For bringing riches to many men, it brings prosperity and a refreshing draught to the dwellers on the shore."<sup>15</sup> They paid their deep-felt homage to the fertile earth of the Indo-Gangetic plain, the earth "on whom the ocean and the rivers and the waters, on whom food and cornlands come into their being, on whom lives all that breathes and is active." They accepted both the struggle and the joy of the earth, "whereon men sing and dance, whereon men meet in battle, and the war-cry rises and the drum resounds."<sup>16</sup>

As the conflicts of the opening phase of the occupation died away, the struggle was confined to the more peaceful and productive struggle of man with the soil in the endeavour to make it yield its bounties. The warrior becomes the cultivator. "O Lord of the field, bestow on us sweet, pure, butter-like, delicious and copious rain, even as cows give us milk! May the plants be sweet unto us! Let the oxen work merrily! Let the plough move on merrily! Ply the goad merrily!" The Rig Veda gives us a fine vignette of this agricultural life. The husbandmen, when watering the fields, shout to frighten away the birds. Reservoirs of drinking water are prepared for the cattle and for the men. Stone wheels and leathern thongs are fixed to the wells. The leather bags are made carefully, so that water may not leak out of them. The team of bullocks is yoked and the plough turns up the earth. When the harvest is ready, the sheaves are gathered from the fields and carried away in carts.<sup>17</sup> Hard work in the fields was accepted as the road to prosperity and the satisfaction of the normal and legitimate desires. "May the sharp-pointed, well-furrowing, smooth-handled plough throw up for us cattle and sheep, a horse to draw the cart, and a plump lass!"<sup>18</sup>

Ancillary occupations grow up. An industrious people begin to carve out various careers, with a self-reliant outlook. "May I not have to live upon the earnings of others!"<sup>19</sup> There is no morbid turning away from wealth, but religious feeling and moral sense, it is recognised, should guide ability and industry in the pursuit of prosperity. "Let a man think well on wealth and strive to win it by the path of law and by worship!"<sup>20</sup> The tolerant, optimistic,



well-adjusted outlook comes out in a poem where the poet looks on with pleasant humour at the world of men, including himself, seeking their desires, and the livelihoods which are the means of their satisfaction. "We all have various thoughts and plans, and diverse are the ways of men. The carpenter desires a rift so that he can repair it, the leech looks out for a fracture which he can set right. A bard am I, my father a leech, my mother grinds corn with the millstone. Striving for wealth, with varied plans, we follow our desires like kine." This is the way of the world, as natural as the desire of animal life for the favourable natural milieu, as normal as sex. "The male desires his mate's approach; the frog is eager for the flood."<sup>21</sup> We find the Brahmin and the exorciser also in this crowd. "The Brahmin seeks the worshipper." And the exorciser advertises his talents. "I am a pest to the evil spirits, as the tiger to the owners of oxen. Like dogs, when confronted by the lion, they have no means of escape from me."

This early society should not be unrealistically idealised. It had its own troubles. There were men who wanted to gamble rather than work for wealth. An extraordinary poem in the Rig Veda<sup>22</sup> is the lament of the gambler. The excitement of the game goes to his head like a draught of Soma juice. He is drawn to the dice like a woman to her lover. But there probably were not many such dissolute types in society. In this poem itself, the gambler realises that the dice, though cold, are like burning pieces of charcoal which scorch the heart. He knows that his forsaken wife is in utter misery and his mother is mourning for the son who roams she knows not where. He recalls the advice of the good people, of the god Savitar himself. "Let the dice alone. Cultivate thy cornfield. Delight in that wealth (won by hard toil and not gambling). Here is thy cattle. Here is thy wife."

Intoxicating drinks were widely used and the Rig Veda mentions three women, Viswavara, Yajata and Mayi, who desired each other for companionship in drinking and often became intoxicated with excessive drink. Black magic was also current, especially among the lower strata. There were spells for success in gambling, for persuading the miser to part with money. The spells for winning the love of damsels have a rare incantational power. "With this arrow levelled well, shall Kama (Cupid) pierce thee to



the heart. It is winged with longing, barbed with love, its shaft is formed of intense desire."<sup>23</sup> Pulsating with neurotic power is this spell. "Let thy heart wither for my love, and let thy mouth be dry for me. Parch and dry up with longing, go with lips that love of me has dried. Desire my body, love my feet, love thou mine eyes, love my legs . . . I make thee lie upon my heart." The woman's curse on the rival wife is unbearably intense. "May she long sit with her relatives (unsolicited by the husband) until her hair drops from her head. This woman shall be the keeper of thy house, O God of death, we make over her to thee!" Some spells were for countering the curses of others. "Bend round and pass us by, O curse, even as a burning fire a lake. Strike him down that curses us, as heaven's lightning smites the tree. He who curses me, I throw him to death like a bone to the dog."<sup>24</sup> The effective use of imagery even in such compositions should be noted. Another counter-spell reads. "As, rising in the east, the sun takes away the stars' brightness, so the strength of my foes I take away."<sup>25</sup>

But the morbid nature of such popular practices should not be exaggerated. Many of the spells are for auspicious purposes and relied on psychological suggestion for their efficacy. Here is one, seeking to get rid of cough. "Just as the arrow, sharpened well, swift to a distance flies away, so even thou, O cough, fly forth along the broad expanse of the earth."<sup>26</sup> The incantation seeks to make the illness leave the patient. "Downward is blown the blast of wind, downward the burning sunbeams shoot, adown the milk streams from the cow. So downward may thy ailment go!"<sup>27</sup> Some spells sought to rescue a man lying on the brink of dissolution so that he could live for a hundred autumns. "Rise up, O man, from here and cast death's fetters from thy feet. From life upon this earth, be not yet sundered, nor from the sight of Agni and the sunlight."<sup>28</sup> The war spells were obviously meant to strengthen the faith of the fighting men. A hymn to the battle drum reads. "As birds start back affrighted at the eagle's cry, as day and night they tremble at the lion's roar, so thou, O drum, shout out against our enemies, scare them away in terror and confound their minds."<sup>29</sup>

Death, to ward off which was the aim of many spells, was not regarded with any morbid fear by the Aryans. What they prayed



to be spared from was premature death. For they knew that everything born was destined to pass away, that time, itself, implied death. "The year is death. For it is the year that destroys, through the means of day and night, the life of mortals."<sup>30</sup> In a remarkable poem in the Rig Veda,<sup>31</sup> we find the child deploring the fact that his father, the chief of the clan, has taken the road to the realm where Yama (Death) rules. In the very next stanza, we find the messenger has arrived to take the child also to this realm. The abrupt transition shows that all generations will have to travel along this route, sooner or later. The general conception was that the dead lived happily in a world of their own, free from all blemishes of the body. There the departed could ultimately meet their parents and their children.<sup>32</sup> There is a reference in the Rig Veda to a realm of darkness to which the wicked are expelled by Indra and from which there is no return. But no vivid concept of any kind of hell arose during Vedic times. Likewise, transmigration and rebirth seem obscurely hinted at in certain passages, but the beliefs have not hardened yet.

The hymns for burial and cremation, both of which were practised in the early phase, have a high nobility of accent and show, further, that the responsibility of the living was not allowed to be affected by excessive regrets for the departed. "Go to the bosom of thy mother earth, this earth extending far and most propitious. The freshly turned earth is soft as wool. May she preserve thee from the lap of dissolution. Open wide, O earth, to receive him. Press not heavily on him. Be a comfort to him. Cover him up, O earth, as a mother covers her child with the skirt of her garment."<sup>33</sup> Cremation, likewise, returned man to the energy of nature from which he was first moulded. "Let your eye go to the sun, your life to the wind." The lament is poignant but brief and it allows a speedy return to the tasks of living. The speaker, probably the heir of the deceased, refers to the bystanders and chants. "These living ones are from the dead divided. Our calling on the gods is now auspicious . . . From the dead hand I take the bow he wielded, to gain for us dominion, might and glory. Thou there, we here, rich in heroic offspring, will vanquish all assaults of every foe man." This hymn also reveals that the first to enter a bereaved household for the funeral gathering were the women. "Let those women, who are not widows and who



have good husbands, enter, anointed with unguent and balm. Let the women without tears, without sorrow, well adorned with jewels, proceed to the house first." Against bleak death are placed the beauty and glory of womanhood to suggest the motherhood of the future generations which carry on the torch of life though individuals pass away.

Woman enjoyed a high status in Vedic Aryan society. The indirect references to her are as interesting as the direct. Thus, in the description of the wind-gods, we come across this simile. Like women keeping at home, they live behind the veil of the clouds. Sometimes they come out and make their inspiring presence felt, like women looking fine while taking part in sacrificial festivities and in chanting hymns.<sup>34</sup> Woman is addressed in words which suggest beauty, purity and auspiciousness, like Kalyani, the blissful one, or Subhaga, the graceful one. The purity of the chaste wife has been a point of comparison for divine purity.<sup>35</sup> God Agni is compared to a wife in the home who is an ornament to all.<sup>36</sup>

Child wives first occur only in the later period of Sutra literature. The Vedic references suggest that women usually married after reaching maturity. The romantic conception of marriage is mirrored in the poetic myth of the marriage of Pushan and Surya, the daughter of the sun.<sup>37</sup> Pushan is a heroic, handsome youth who undertakes a brave adventure across the ocean and the sky to win the hand of a beautiful damsel. The bridegroom approaches the father for his consent. But mutual love is the prior fact. "Savita gave Surya to the bridegroom whom she admired with her heart."<sup>38</sup> If, in this verse, the bride is described as being given to the bridegroom, in the earlier verse, the gods are described as giving Pushan to Surya—an interesting detail which implies the equality of the partners in marriage.

Again, there should not be any excessive idealisation. Women had the right to select their partners and sometimes the choice was made for the wrong reasons. A Vedic verse tells us that there are many girls who prefer the wealthy to the worthy. The disappointed male must have been the originator of this and sayings like the following. "Indra himself said this. 'The mind of woman is hard to instruct; her intelligence is small'.<sup>39</sup>" "There are no friendships with women; their hearts are those of hyenas."<sup>40</sup> But



another verse shows that men also were swayed by unworthy considerations. "How many a maiden is an object of affection to her lover because of her wealth!"<sup>41</sup> The tragic note is also heard at times, as in the stories of Ghosha and Apala in the Rig Veda.<sup>42</sup> Ghosha, afflicted with leprosy and unable, consequently, to get a husband, piteously prays to the Asvins, the divine physicians, to heal her. She is "growing old at home." So let them grant her health and youthful beauty, and help her to get a rich chief-tain husband. Let them, further, enlighten her about the amorous art, of which she has been kept ignorant by cruel fate. The intense pent-up desires of the old maid are movingly brought out in this poem. Even more tragic is the fate of Apala. She was married, but when she was attacked by skin disease, she was disowned by her husband. She turns to Indra as her only resort and prays to him to heal her and reunite her with her husband.

### III. *Familial Bonds*

But such vagaries and tragedies are inevitable in any society. What is important for us to remember is that the whole conception of marriage as revealed in the hymns of the Rig Veda,<sup>43</sup> the Atharva Veda,<sup>44</sup> and certain supplementary Mantras, is a most noble and exalted one. The bride is the "bringer of good fortune." At the beginning of the marriage ceremony, the guests are asked to wish her all happiness. The hymns recited by both the bridegroom and the bride show that marriage was regarded as a sacrament which welded two lives into one destiny. Addressing the bride, the bridegroom says. "I am the melody, you are the lyric. I am heaven, you are earth. I take your hand in mine that you may live to old age with me, your husband." After taking seven steps together, the bridegroom says. "May I never fall off from your friendship. May you never fall off from my friendship. Let us resolve together that, bound in love, and ever radiant in each other's company, sharing together all enjoyments and pleasures, we may unite our thoughts, our duties and our ideals."<sup>45</sup> Both groom and bride chant. "Put thou me within thy heart. May our minds verily be together."<sup>46</sup> The wife's status was equal to that of her husband. "The wife is verily the half of the husband."<sup>47</sup> Every sacred rite required the presence of both the master



and the mistress of the household. "May you two," says the Atharva Veda, "in the pursuit of Eternal Law, speaking right, enjoy together prosperity and good fortune." Within the home, the wife was virtually the queen. "Be thou a queen after reaching your husband's home," says the Atharva Veda. "The wife is verily the home," says the Rig Veda,<sup>48</sup> and one of the Brahmanas asserts, "The home has verily its foundation in the wife."<sup>49</sup> A tender benediction reads. "Bounteous Indra! Endow this woman with excellent sons and fortune. Give her ten sons and make her husband the eleventh."<sup>50</sup> That is, the husband should always be attended to with love and care as if he were the youngest child.

The wife was the partner of the husband not only in the sheltered home but in the tumultuous arena of public life. In the Rig Veda, we read of Indrasena Mudgalani, a heroic lady who bravely drove her chariot and helped her husband in winning hundreds of cattle well pastured in a memorable conflict in which both of them took part. It is probable that the fight was with a band of robbers who had lifted their cattle or it may refer to a hotly contested chariot-race in which the couple succeeded in winning the rich wager of cattle. Her husband thus speaks of her exploit. "The wind blew up her vesture as, driving in her chariot, she won a thousand . . . With her as charioteer, rejoicing like a long separated wife meeting her husband, swelling like a cloud pouring down rain upon the earth, and filled with the desire of winning the cattle, shall I win in this contest. Indrasena yoked the bull to the chariot. This charioteer with flowing hair made the bull bellow. As the irresistible bull dashed on with speed, the opponents rushed towards Mudgalani."<sup>51</sup>

Monogamy and life-long companionship of the couple seem to have been the ideal of married life. "May you two dwell here. Be not parted. Enjoy the full span of life, sporting with sons and grandsons, rejoicing in your own home."<sup>52</sup> The ascetic distrust of the marital bond came later. During the Vedic period, the sages, who retired to the forest retreats, were accompanied by their wives. The desire for children was accepted as legitimate even in this late phase of life. Very human and delicate in feeling is the dialogue between Lopamudra and her husband Agastya. Lopamudra says: "For many a long year in the past, both by day and night, as well as in the mornings, have I been wearing



myself out, serving you with devotion. Now, decay, following upon advanced years, impairs the beauty of my limbs. May not the husbands meet their wives?" Those ancient sages, who taught the Eternal Law, who indeed conversed with the very gods, did beget children, nor did they break their penances thereby, because these came not to an end."<sup>53</sup> The concluding verse tells us that the venerable sage discharged both his obligations, his duties both of the domestic as well as of the ascetic life, and won blessings from the gods.

Remarriage of the surviving partner after the death of the other seems to have been the practice. The bridegroom brought home with his wife the household fire which was set up and maintained with sedulous care by the couple. Together they made offerings to it every day. If the wife died, a flame from the same fire was used to consume her mortal remains. The nuptial fire which thus becomes the funeral fire is now extinguished and the householder, unless he became a forest recluse, was expected to marry again, because his paramount duty, the daily offering to the sacred fire, could not be carried on without the wife. With the remarriage, a new fire is brought into the household. Widows were also allowed to remarry. As the impact of the tragedy was more severe on the woman, threatening her livelihood itself, some willing member of the community accepted her as his wife at the funeral ceremony of the departed husband itself. In the funeral hymn we see the man addressing the widow. "Rise up, come to the world of life, O woman. You are lying here by the side of one whose soul has left him. Come, you have now entered upon the wifehood of this thy lord who takes thy hand and woos thee."<sup>54</sup>

The finest thing about the conception of marriage in the Vedic period is its successful integration of romanticism, the yearning of the young heart for intimate companionship, with social responsibility. The bride was the potential mother, the great vehicle for racial continuity. "Grant, O Indra, that this damsel may have excellent sons . . . . Be thou the mother of heroic sons."<sup>55</sup> When the father first took the newborn child in his arms, he uttered this benediction. "From each limb of mine are you born. You are born especially from my heart. You are my own self bearing the name son. May you live for a hundred autumns."<sup>56</sup> Fine vignettes of domestic life are scattered throughout Vedic



poetry. We find references to the mother bending to feed her child, the mother kissing her child and the child returning the kiss, babes in arms reposing on their mother, playful children with handsome mothers.<sup>57</sup> The house, which is a mere shelter, thus becomes a home, the nexus of human feeling and enriching bonds. "Sweet be my going forth from the home and sweet my return."<sup>58</sup> Complete understanding of all members of the family was the domestic ideal. Addressing the entire family group, a sage utters this benediction. "I shall make you of united heart, of one mind, free from hate. Be attached to one another like the newly born calf to the cow. Be the son submissive to the father and of one mind with his mother. Let the wife to the husband speak words full of honey, ever auspicious. Let not brother hate brother, nor sister sister. Be all of one mind and one high purpose, speak only auspicious words to one another. May your drink be common, your food be together . . . Late and early, be well-willing yours."<sup>59</sup>

#### *IV. Social Bonds*

The individual did not become a fully developed and responsible member of society unless he had a son. Premature asceticism was condemned. "What is the use of dirt, what of goat-skin, what of long hair, and what of fervour? . . . A sonless person cannot attain heaven . . . The delights in the earth, the delights in the fire, the delight in the waters, greater than these is that of a father in the son."<sup>60</sup> A system of training was perfected early for the education of the young. The most important feature of this discipline was its emphasis on character. There is a fine story<sup>61</sup> according to which the goddess of learning approached the teacher and said. "Preserve me, I am verily thy treasure. Deliver me not to one who is full of envy and discontent, one who is not straight in his conduct, nor to one of uncontrolled passions. But deliver me to him whom thou shalt know to be pure, attentive, intelligent, firm in chastity." The student lived in the household of the teacher as a member of the family, sharing responsibilities, integrating work and learning, assimilating the influence of the character of the teacher. We have fine stories of the devotion of the students to the teacher. Thus, Aruni of the Panchala country,



failing to stop the inrush of waters into his teacher's field, laid himself down at the breach in the dike and continued there for hours.<sup>62</sup>

The curriculum included the study of sacred lore as well as literary disciplines like phonetics, grammar and metrics, sciences like astronomy and medicine and practical training like the science of arms. The method of teaching was catechetical, the pupil asking questions and the teacher discoursing at length on the topics referred to him. Education seems to have been widespread. King Asvapati Kaikeya makes the claim. "In my kingdom there is no ignorant person."<sup>63</sup> Coeducation of grown up men and women seems to have been the practice. A clear reference to this is found in the Aitareya Upanishad.<sup>64</sup> While going to give a lesson on eugenics, it directs, presumably for the sake of decency, that expectant mothers should go away and return when this lecture is concluded. The Upanishads mention several women as teachers and scholarly women like Gargi made splendid contribution to the great debates on philosophy.<sup>65</sup>

The final address of the teacher when the student, after completing his education, was about to leave, is a most inspiring convocation address. "Speak the truth. Do thy duty. Do not neglect your study . . . Be thy mother to thee like unto a deity. Be thy father to thee like unto a god. Adore your teacher like a god. Revere thy guest like a god. Whatever actions of ours were blameless, those you must follow, not the others. Whatever acts were good in our conduct, those shalt thou respect, not the others. And those teachers who are superior to us, them you should honour. Give thou must, with faith, not without respect, with pleasure, with modesty, with friendliness. If you should have a doubt about a duty or a conduct, conduct yourself as is done by such learned men who can deliberate well, are devoted to their duties on their own or others' behalf, are not severe and are desirous of righteousness. This is the inner teaching of the Veda."<sup>66</sup> The most remarkable feature of this address is its careful distinction between indoctrination, which leads to blind conformity and acceptance, and education which strengthens the critical spirit.

The youth was now a mature member of society. He recognised that every human being entered into a four-fold obligation



from birth: to the gods, to the great sages, to his ancestors, to men.<sup>67</sup> He discharged his obligations to the gods by ritual offerings, to the sages by study of the scriptures, to his ancestors by marrying and bringing up a new generation, to men by his hospitality and offer of help. The social bond and the capacity for friendship were frequently emphasized. "In the case of one who has deserted a wise comrade, there is no grace even in the holy scripture recited by him."<sup>68</sup> Every one was to engage in some productive work. "Ploughing the soil, the share produces nurture. He who bestirs his feet performs his journey." But luck does not favour every one equally. "Fortune, like two chariot wheels revolving, now to one man comes nigh, now to another." Therefore, it was every one's duty to help the distressed. "Who has the power should give unto the needy."<sup>69</sup> The selfish man who does not feed a friend is condemned. "One who feeds all by himself sins all by himself."<sup>70</sup> In the rite preceding the partaking of a meal, symbolic offering is made to all beings. One has, besides, to look out for any guest in need of food before he actually sits down to his meal.

The individual was expected to be a useful member of society in various ways. In a prayer for the ideal son, he is defined as a youth fit for the home, for work; for the religious assembly, and for the political council, and thus a source of glory to his father.<sup>71</sup> The political assembly allowed the free play of distinctive individual capacity, but was essentially democratic in its spirit and method of work. In the Yajur Veda, there is a prayer that the prince should have a son, capable of playing his part in the political gathering.<sup>72</sup> The Rig Veda refers to the man who has carried the day in the political assembly. "All his friends are delighted with the man who has triumphed in the council and returned in glory."<sup>73</sup> But care was taken to see that democracy did not degenerate into the competition of party interests or pressure groups. Differences of opinion might arise, but so long as there was a basic unity, such differences could be ultimately resolved by free discussion as to what course was dictated by the general interest. Very important to this appraisal is the Rig Vedic instruction regarding the conduct of the assembly. "Assemble; discuss with one another. Let your minds be of one accord. A common purpose do I lay before you. Common be your aim, and your hearts



united. May there be perfect concord."<sup>74</sup>

A very important question is the exact date of the petrification of the caste-system. The most careful analysis of the Vedic texts indicates that this occurred in the latest phase of the decline of the Vedic culture. It is true that the racial difference in the first confrontation of Aryan and Non-Aryan was the germinal context of caste differentiation. Varna, the word for caste, reveals its basis in colour difference. But when the process of settling down began, the polarisation between Aryan and Non-Aryan changed over to the polarity of friend and foe, either of whom could be found in the ranks of the Aryan as well as the Non-Aryan race. As racial admixture went on and as the economy developed, social division of labour arose. The Purusha Sukta in the Rig Veda<sup>75</sup> uses a great metaphor which is clear in its meaning, although the orthodox upper strata have always tried to misinterpret it. Here, human society is imagined to be a mighty person and his limbs represent the important orders of society. The mouth become the Brahmin, the arms the warrior, the thighs the industrialist, the feet the working man. What is implied here is social division of labour, not a caste hierarchy. Society should consist of men following four broad types of pursuits—culture, politics and administration, industry and labour. It is very important to note that the Vedas think of types of work, not castes in the sense of fixed, hereditary groups. If any ambiguity lingers here, it can be completely removed by pointing out that all classes enjoyed the freedom of fullest participation in religion as well as government. The Vedas were meant for all. A sage in the Yajur Veda says: "I speak these blessed words to the people at large, to the Brahmin and the Kshatriya, to the Sudra and the Vaishya, to my own people and to the foreigner."<sup>76</sup> A hymn to Rudra greets all classes. "Obeisance to the counsellor at assemblies, to the merchant. Obeisance to the carpenters and artisans, to potters and blacksmiths."<sup>77</sup> All classes were equally necessary for the prosperity of the country and the benediction covers all of them. "Give lustre to our Brahmins, give lustre to Kshatriyas, give lustre to Vaishyas, give lustre to Sudras."<sup>78</sup>

As the community grew and regional variations in creed and belief arose, a cosmopolitan outlook also began to emerge. There is the realisation that the earth bears people speaking varied



languages, with various religious practices differing according to the region.<sup>79</sup> The earth to which the Vedic poet now prays is no longer a tribal goddess, but this great mother of the nations. Likewise, "Varuna belongs to our own land and also to the foreign land."<sup>80</sup> In praying for forgiveness of sins, the recognition dawns that transgressions against the stranger are as sinful as offences against one's own people,<sup>81</sup> since the whole of humanity is one family. Friendly co-existence with the entire world of living things is now the ideal. "May all beings look on me with the eye of a friend. May I look on all beings with the eye of a friend."<sup>82</sup> With mind and heart thus enlarged by the spectacle of the family of many communities realising their varied life-patterns on the bosom of mother earth, the Vedic poet rises to a sublime invocation of peace, where the peace he yearns for himself is something shared by the entire universe. "Peace of sky, peace of the mid-region, peace of earth, peace of waters, peace of plants! Peace of trees, peace of all gods, peace of Brahman, peace of the universe, peace of peace, may that peace come to me"<sup>83</sup>. . . . With these invocations of peace, I render peaceful whatever here is terrible, whatever here is cruel, whatever here is sinful."<sup>84</sup>



## CHAPTER THREE

# From Poetic Myth To Poetic Intuition

## *I. The Poetic Myth*

LATER SCHOLARSHIP has often made the claim that every Vedic hymn is the condensed expression of a triple meaning: an overt prayer for material prosperity, a homage to the gods and a veiled, allegorical notation of a profound philosophical intuition. Thus, a hymn to Indra is an expression of the wish for rain, the basis of agricultural prosperity, a homage to the god of rain and an allegory at a far profounder level, where Indra stands for mind, with its uncontrolled, involuntary associations and liking for involvements in the world, which therefore needs to be disciplined before the final insight can be gained.

This tendency to squeeze out meanings has appeared in almost all religions, in the Kabbalistic traditions of the Jews, in Origen and St. Augustine in Christianity, in the Sufi meditations in Islam. Such straining of meaning is neither necessary nor valid. It is not necessary, because even without the help of these extreme devices, we can clearly see Vedic thought soaring to the loftiest heights. It is not valid, because it does not allow for a normal evolution of the racial mind and sensibility from poetic but dim intuitions to luminous, assured perceptions. No race is born fully mature. To state that does not mean that it never reaches maturity. It does, but through a normal process of growth.

The earlier Vedic hymns sparkle with the vigour and freshness of the morning of mankind. The song rises spontaneously to the lips, as the reaction of a sensitive heart to the wonder and beauty of existence. But the critical faculty awakes at once to this new wonder, a rill of beauty that seems to have mysteriously welled up from within. And the absorbed study of the miracle leads to the fullest development of the artistic sensibility, and the realisation that only that expression is perfect where there is a marriage of inspiration and form, myth and meaning. When this stage



is reached, the search for hidden meanings becomes legitimate and justifiable.

The spontaneity of inner inspiration is realised here. "Like joyous streams bursting from the mountain, to the Lord our hymns have sounded."<sup>1</sup> This spontaneous song is a miracle. The glorious word occurring spontaneously to the poet is like "the appearance of the finely-robed loving wife before her husband."<sup>2</sup> But it is rapidly realised that the miracle is not external but arises within. It is realised that the goddess of poetic utterance reveals her divine self only to those who are trained to understand her real nature.<sup>3</sup> The philosophy of grammar develops this concept, later. According to Patanjali, the grammarian is a Yogi whose inward vision enables him to look within and see the eternal flow of pure consciousness. It is this consciousness that incarnates in the two-fold category of sound and meaning and what we call speech, the vehicle of communication, is nothing but an expression of the spirit active within. The knower of the secret of speech visualises Brahman in the wreath of letters. To Patanjali, the alphabets are not mere phonetic types, but glowing sparks of Brahman illuminating the entire sphere of existence. They are eternal, an adjective often applied to Brahman. It is this profound inwardness of the mystery of language that led Bhartrhari, later, to define grammar as the door leading to the final beatitude.

The Vedic reference to the soul as enjoying the flavour or essence (Rasa) of experience<sup>4</sup> is the germinal beginning of later aesthetic theory and reveals that the Vedic poets had a true appreciation of the real inwardness of aesthetic experience. One Rig Vedic verse<sup>5</sup> denounces the person who sees only the externals in poetry and praises the person of sensibility to whom alone the beauty of the inner sense is revealed. This places the right emphasis on the inner meaning. But the importance of form is not underestimated. "When men of wisdom create verse after winnowing words, as barley grains are sifted by means of a winnowing basket, then men of equal sensibility recognise the meaning. In such verses, blessed glory is enshrined."<sup>6</sup>

All this indicates a great evolution from the first phase when men sang as the bird sang. The poet is now a self-conscious artist, who realises the preciousness of his creation. Two personified rivers, addressing a poet, say, "Forget not, Singer, this word



of thine, the afterages will echo.”<sup>7</sup> Men realise the enduring quality of poetic utterance and want to be immortalised through song. “May we be victors, celebrated in the songs of poets.”<sup>8</sup> A poet, realising the value of his song-offering, expects gifts in return. “O Bright One, give to thy singer great wealth.”<sup>9</sup> And another is emboldened to make this clever plea. “If, O God, I were you, and you were I, your appeals would have their due fulfilment.”<sup>10</sup> The poetic utterance is the finest offering to God and one poet says, “As the wife embraces the husband, the comely bridegroom, so my song embraces the Bountiful One.”<sup>11</sup> The song is a child. “May Aditi my praise-song accept, as a mother her heart-glad-dening son.”<sup>12</sup> In a far bolder metaphor, the song is the mother and God the child whom she kisses.<sup>13</sup>

Literary craftsmanship is recognised to be as important as inspiration. “As an expert artisan constructs a chariot, so have I composed this hymn for thee, O Agni.” At the popular level, literary craftsmanship creates fine poetic riddles like this: “A shepherd I saw, who does not fall down, who wanders up and down on his paths. Clothing himself in those which run together and those which disperse, he circles about in the worlds.” The answer is the sun, with his garment of rays. Here is another chain riddle. “Who wanders lonely on his way? Who is constantly born anew? What is the remedy for cold? What is the great corn-vessel called?” “The sun wanders lonely on his way. The moon is constantly born anew. Fire is the remedy for cold. The earth is the great corn-vessel.”<sup>14</sup> At a higher level of poetic creation, it creates poetic tissues enriched with simile and metaphor. In the Yajur Veda, a tree in full bloom, emitting fragrance to the breeze which carries it in all directions, is used as a simile to describe the noble man doing good actions, the fame of which spreads far and wide. Here a concrete image is used to bring out an abstract quality. But poetic creativity soon becomes mature enough to make bold uses of abstractions. “Pure thought was the pillow of her couch, clear sight was the unguent of her eyes. Her jewellery was sky and earth when Surya went to her husband.”<sup>15</sup> When the poetic creation reaches this level, we are dealing with a very mature sensibility. But it is the result of a long growth and what we have now to do is to study the evolution of myth in the light of this evolution of the poetic faculty.



Vedic poetry begins as a human and richly sensitive reaction to the beauty of life and nature, the glory of dawn and dusk and night, the loveliness of river and forest and winds, the responsive bonds between nature and creaturely life. When we see a hymn to the frogs in the Rig Veda,<sup>16</sup> the hasty conclusion that the frogs were worshipped as the harbingers of rain seems deplorable and terribly prosaic. The poem is a piece of pure nature description. The observation has remarkable graphic power and the narration is enlivened by humour, probably unconscious. Throughout the summer, the frogs lie like shrivelled skins, heated like kettles, in the dry pool. But with the advent of rain, they become excited and lift their voice. "Delighted at the falling of the water, one seizes and congratulates the other. In glee each wet and dripping frog jumps upward, the green ones and the speckled join their voices. When one calls out, another quickly answers, like boys at school repeating their teacher's words. As Brahmins at the great Soma offering sit round the large and brimming vessel talking, so they throng round the pool to hallow this day of all the year that brings the rainy season."

There is the same, purely poetic, reaction to the beauty of river and forest, where any personification that appears is what is legitimate to poetry, not to be confused with the anthropomorphisation of primitive animism. The roar and rush of the waters of the Indus are captured here. "From earth the tremendous roar swells upward to the sky, with brilliant spray she speeds in unending surge. As when the streams of rain pour thundering from the cloud, the Sindhu rushes onward like a bellowing bull."<sup>17</sup> Even finer is the evocation of the forest, poetically personified as Aranyani, the forest-nymph. The strange sounds that emanate from the heart of the woods, especially at the hour of twilight, the dim shapes that the eye seems to discern in the depth of the forest and above all, the surging life of nature that attains to a lush growth without the help of a tiller or the plough, are caught in this poem with a great suggestive power. "Sounds as of grazing cows are heard, a dwelling house appears to loom, the forest creaks like a cart at eventide. Here some one seems to call his cow to him, another there seems to be felling wood. Who tarries in the forest-glade, thinks to himself, 'I heard a cry'. Sweet-scented, redolent of balm, replete with food, yet tilling not, mother



of beasts, the Forest-Nymph, her have I magnified with praise.”<sup>18</sup>

In a poem in the Yajur Veda, the sun and the moon are described as two babes frolicking on the playground of the heavens. Their alternate play-times are the day and night. There is no contrast of light and darkness between them, for the night invoked here is the bright, starlit night. They are twin goddesses, “one decking herself with sunlight, the other with stars.” The poem to night breathes a profound peace. “Night comes on, the goddess shines in many places with her light. Gloriously has she decked herself. Darkness she drives away with light. She fills the valleys and the heights. At thy approach, we seek our homes, as birds their nests upon the trees. The villagers have gone to rest, and the footed beasts and the winged birds. The hungry hawk himself is still. Ward off from us the she-wolf and the wolf, ward off the robber, goddess Night! So take us safe across the gloom.”<sup>19</sup>

The personifications of the forest and the night are poetic concretisations, but they also mark the transition to the nature myth. But it is very important to remember that the Vedic deities are not hard crystallisations of myth as are the Olympian gods of the Greeks as well as the gods of the Hindu pantheon itself in the later, Puranic age. The Vedic gods are transparent. It is pure nature poetry, with just that poetic personification which a metaphor can suggest. The form of the god or goddess never becomes completely opaque. We see through it the natural phenomenon which gave it its suggestion of form. Thus, all the loveliness of day-break is distilled into the fine image of Dawn. “This light is come, amid all lights the fairest. Born is the brilliant, far-extending brightness. Bright leader of glad sounds, our eyes behold her. Splendid in hue, she has opened the portals. Dawn has awakened every living creature.”<sup>20</sup> A wealth of imagery is showered on her. We see her as the “noble lady,” as one “who goes like a maiden in pride of beauty, smiling, youthful, brightly shining,” as one “who is lovely as a bride adorned by her mother,” as the beauty, who “as if conscious of her bright limbs after bathing, stands erect, desiring, as it were, that we should see her.” Like a dancer she enrobes herself in embroidered garments which both veil and reveal her form.<sup>21</sup>

In the day sky, the sun is the sole orb of light and if we were dealing with only the primitive religious sense creating a myth,



we would have had only one sun-god. But richly varied are the play and effects of sunlight and the poetic tribute seeks as varied forms. Dawn and the Aswins represent the mellow, rosy light of day-break. Surya is the young sun before whom the constellations flee like thieves together with their beams.<sup>22</sup> Pushan is also a solar deity, but he becomes more specifically a pathfinder, to whom shepherds and wanderers look for guidance. Savita is also the personification of the sun. He blesses daily. In the morning he brings renewed, refreshed life and at evening, rest. Then he cloaks himself in a brown-red mantle and hastens down the heights on well-paved, dustless paths. This is the signal to rest for all things living. "The weaver rolls her growing web together and in the midst the workman leaves his labour. For home the long-ing wanderer's heart is yearning. The restless, darting fish, at fall of evening seeks its refuge in the waters, their stall the cattle." The god does not rest from work even when he is absent from our vision. For, in the dark night, he guides the great host of stars in their voyage through the vast abysses of space.

We have already referred to the beautiful poems to earth. The great advent of the monsoon storm, which convulsed earth and sky, gave rise to several poetic personifications like the Maruts, Parjanya and Indra. The Maruts are the storm-gods.<sup>23</sup> They are a troop of youthful warriors, "born from the laughter of lightning," their bodies bright like fire, armed with battle-axes or spears and wearing helmets upon their heads. They are decked with golden ornaments like the heavens with stars. They ride on golden chariots, driving the clouds, which have been described in a beautiful metaphor as spotted deer, and their whip is the lightning. They spread the mists abroad and make even the mountains rock and reel. Before their terrible advance, the whole earth trembles and the mighty forests bow down in fear. They destroy the woods like wild elephants. They are the progeny of Rudra and the Cloud-Mother. As in the case of Rudra, though their general aspect is terrible, they are also described as the bringers of auspiciousness. They milk the clouds and bedew the earth with fertilising rain. They are now described as sportive like children or young calves. The rain-fed rivers echo the thunder of their chariot wheels in the sky and run with speed, nourishing the expanses of the earth. Associated with the Maruts is Parjanya, the



Rain God. Often likened to a bull, Parjanya whips up the harbingers of rain with wild uproar, deep as the distant roar of the lion. Swiftly he mobilises his clouds for rain. The winds rush, the lightnings fall stroke on stroke. The rain flood makes the heights and hollows equal. But life gains a vigorous renewal from this tremendous drama of the elements. Nourishment in abundance springs for all the world and up shoot the herbs.<sup>24</sup>

## *II. Myth as Symbol*

It is in Indra that the monsoon becomes the full-bodied myth. He assimilates all the features of the Maruts and Parjanya. He wields the thunder and the lightning. The forests and the mountains, the firm foundations of the earth and the very heavens tremble at his advent. He is the slayer of Vritra, the monster of burning drought who dries up the rivers and pastures by seizing all the cloud-cows. The duel is described in spirited verse. The monster is cut up like firewood. His mighty body is carried away by the never ceasing torrents flowing without rest for ever onward. Since the monsoon clouds obscure the sun, with the liberation of the rain is connected the winning of light and the sun. Indra also became the god of battle. As the war god he goes before the advancing colonists. He is the great hero, for whom the lofty mountains are as plains. Even in the deeps there is a ford for him.<sup>25</sup> An obscure passage in the Rig Veda,<sup>26</sup> a dialogue between Indra and his mother, alludes to a myth of which we have no further details. His birth seems to have been unwelcome and he is accused of patricide. This may refer to the defeat of an earlier dynasty of gods by a later and younger dynasty as in the myths of ancient Greece where the gods under Zeus vanquished the earlier Titans.

It is important to realise that the evolution of myth has reached an important stage here. Till now, the myths were transparent, poetic personifications of natural phenomena. They were not comparable to the Olympian gods of Greece who were very concrete anthropomorphisations. For we have many stories about the exploits and adventures of these gods, who were really visualised as heroes with superhuman powers. Parjanya, on the other hand, is the pure rain-storm, enlivened by a poetic personification. But



we notice the difference in the case of Indra. The myth of course takes its origin in a natural phenomenon, the breaking of the monsoon after summer's drought; but the cues from nature begin to be worked up into concrete legend. This is, therefore, a parting of ways in the evolution of myth. One stream, of which the Indra-figure is an early instance, will move in the direction of the epic legend or Purana. Later, when Krishna displaced Indra in Aryan worship, many of the legends about Indra were assimilated by the Krishna figure, in subtle transformations. Thus, while Indra slays Vritra, the demon of drought, Krishna slays Kaliya, the giant snake which dwelt in the waters of the Kalindi river and whose poisonous fumes killed the cowherds and their cattle. In this way, the transparent early myth would develop into full-bodied legend in numerous instances. Thus, in order to indicate the fury of Rudra, suggested by a violent storm, the Rig Veda refers to him as a Varaha or mighty boar.<sup>27</sup> This germinal suggestion would later expand into the story of a regular incarnation of God as the mighty boar who rescued the earth when she was swallowed up by the sea in some primeval geological cataclysm. Similarly, Vishnu is first a solar deity. He traverses the sky whose mighty arch has three points, the eastern horizon where the sun rises, the zenith and the sunset point in the west. At a higher level of symbolism, Vishnu stands for energy. Thus he exists as the sun in the depths of space, as lightning in the sky, and as fire on earth. Therefore, he is praised as the god in whose three steps the three great worlds are exhausted. This is the germ of the later story in which Vishnu appears as a dwarf before Mahabali, the proud emperor of the whole world, begs for three feet of land, covers the universe with his steps and places his foot on the king's head because all space is exhausted. The concretisation of myth, similarly, gives also cues for the evolution of iconography. "Yonder is Dawn, rich in rays, clad in red hues. She advances, a wonderful figure, with her ten surrounding arms."<sup>28</sup> The ten arms are really the beams of light sent out in the ten directions. But we see here the germinal idea of the iconography of the many-armed goddesses who preside over the Puja festivals of Bengal and elsewhere.

While one stream, in the evolution of myth, moved thus in the direction of legend, a far more important current sped in the



direction of symbolism. The metaphor, here, is intended not so much to capture the external features of a natural phenomenon as to distil the essential meaning of the inward experience. We see the beginning of this type of myth in the emergence of the Soma deity. The Soma is the intoxicating drink crushed from the Soma plant. But a fine web of poetic associations begins to build up rapidly around the exhilarating drink. Its tonic action on the vital powers makes it the symbol of the vital energy (the Bergsonian *élan vital*) by which the universe itself is sustained. Indra gets his energy in his mighty battle with the demons from drinking deep draughts of Soma.<sup>29</sup> The moon, the golden-gleaming drop in the sky, now becomes identified with Soma. It is a drop of the nectar of the gods. The phases of the moon suggest the moon-vessel filling itself month by month with the precious liquor. When the full moon overflowed, then was the time of nature's supreme vigour, the time when men would plant their seeds to ensure the best of crops. The Soma, now identified with the moon, becomes the most potent of health-giving medicines and the god of medicinal plants. The web of poetic association extends still further. The plant world is preserved in health by the streams and rivers. So Soma becomes the god of the streams also. He is described in one poem as rejoicing in the streams, like a young man sporting with graceful maidens.<sup>30</sup> This germinal figure would later develop into the legends of Krishna's sports with the maidens of Vrindavan.

It is essential to note that this type of myth starts with a natural phenomenon just like the type of myth discussed earlier. But while that type moves in the direction of legends and concrete episodes, this undergoes a deepening of inward meaning. It is in the figure of Agni<sup>31</sup> that the profounder possibilities of this current are fully revealed. All the external features of the form of this god are suggested by the energy and action of fire. He is flame-haired and has many tongues. He is often likened to a bird, being winged and darting with rapid flight. He bellows like a bull when he invades the forests. He supports the sky with a pillar, the column of smoke he sends up. The cloud of smoke is also his waving banner in the sky.

But Agni is above all the priest, the mediator between men below and gods above. He is the bearer of the oblation to the



gods. The *ghee* and incense poured into the fire are transformed by it into pure space, the ambient blessing. Sunlight and rain come from the depths of the sky and the prosperity of the earth depends on the regularity of their rhythms. Therefore the cultivator pours into the fire milk and *ghee*, the distilled essence of agricultural prosperity, so that, vaporised by the fire, they will pass into the sky and nourish its energy. Fire is the vehicle of this antiphonal response between earth and sky, men and gods.

Agni suggests several other important concepts. He is a god, but he has taken up his abode among mortals. He is termed the guest, the lord of the house. This poetic perception will later lead to the philosophical realisation that the transcendent can also be the immanent. The energy of fire manifests itself in numerous forms, which suggests that behind the plurality of the world may be a unity. Agni is the oldest of the gods, but since he is lit every morning, he is also the youngest of the gods, another poetic perception which points to the timelessness of god.

The rich sensibility of the Vedic Aryans created poetic myths out of natural phenomena and the deepening of the myth led to philosophical intuitions that did not cease to be poetic even though they winged their way to the heights of pure, abstract thought. Let us now follow this Vedic adventure into the heights.

### III. Intuition of God

When the mind of the Vedic Aryan rose from the nature myth to reflection on the processes of nature, one of the first impressions that made a profound impact was the transience of life. It is significant that this realisation awakes with the perception of beauty, for it is beauty that shocks the mind into awareness of the fact that it is not allowed to man to be here for ever to enjoy that beauty. The dawn roves back through wild centuries, but the generations that greet its beauty fade away one by one. So look thy last on all things lovely, as long as life lasts. So sang an ancient Walter de la Mare among the Aryans.

This poignant perception wells up like a sudden jet in the hymn to Dawn.<sup>32</sup> After looking on entranced at the burst of glory in the eastern sky, the poet whispers to himself this poignant melody on muted strings. "Vanished and gone long since are all those



mortals who looked upon the dawn's bright radiance in former ages. We now behold her brightness, and they are coming who will see her in times to come . . . Dawn awakens every living creature, but him who is dead she wakes not from his slumber . . . . We have arrived at the hour of dawn where men prolong existence for a new day . . . Shine then today, goddess, on him who lauds thee." The ultimate fate of transience does not at all embitter the enjoyment of life, but the impression of the unceasing flow of time remains. "Night and day are the twin sisters who weave the pattern of time, which is ageless and the weaving is endless."<sup>33</sup> Time now emerges as a mighty, eternal, self-sufficient entity. "Time is ageless, rich in seed. All worlds are his wheels. Time begot yonder heaven. Time also begot this earth. That which was, and that which shall be, urged forth by Time, spread out. Time created the earth, in Time the sun burns. In Time are all beings, in Time the eye looks abroad."<sup>34</sup> Life and experience sprout in time.

But life and experience seem also to end in time. Is there any being, any god, that is enduring, that is not swept away by this unceasing flood? It is very interesting to note that the ageless features of the human temperament, scepticism, and belief out of fear, both appear here also. Some men, exulting in their success in earthly prosperity, scoffed at the idea of gods. But when nature put on an ominous look, they were frightened back into faith. "Nowhere, Indra," cries a singer, "can you find a rich man for your friend. Men, insolent from drinking, hate you. But when you thunder loud, you bring them together. Then, as a father you are called upon. When Indra hurls hither and thither his lightning, then they believe in the gleaming god."

Such oscillations of the human mind, which can be seen in every culture, belong to the psychology of primitive religion, not to the beginning of philosophical enquiry. But the vigorous questioning, which is the fruitful womb of knowledge, is also seen here. This initiates the movement which would ultimately take the Vedic mind to the loftiest heights. "What God shall we adore with our oblation?"<sup>35</sup> The tentative answer is immediately given. Man shall adore the Divine Being who existed from the beginning, who was the sole lord of creation, who upholds this earth and sky. But, like a stone cast amidst a flock of resting birds, this



forthright questioning raises a flurry of winged queries, for the mind does not want to ignore problems or hug faith by suppressing the critical intellect. Who saw the first being when it was born? What is that unembodied principle which supports the embodied world? From earth are breath and blood; whence comes the soul? If God created the earth and heavens, how was the mighty task accomplished? In the emptiness before creation, where did he find his material? "What was the place on which He gained a footing? What was the wood, and what the tree, pray tell us, from which the earth and heavens were fashioned forth? Ye sages, in your mind, pray make enquiry, whereon He stood, when He the worlds supported?"<sup>36</sup>

It is very important to realise that even before the Upanishads attacked this problem with an analytical capacity matured by experience in abstract speculation, the Rig Veda itself had reached the conclusion that the ultimate beginning was a state which was beyond definition with terms and categories which the human mind could intelligibly handle. The Creation Hymn<sup>37</sup> in the Rig Veda is a very important poem from this point of view. The imagination makes a heroic effort to go back to the ultimate beginning. "There was no air then, neither the worlds, nor the sky beyond. Darkness was covered up by darkness." Time's cycle had not begun. "Of neither night nor day was any semblance." The contrasted categories by which the mind knows concrete realities could not be applied here. "Non-being then existed not, nor being. Death was not, nor immortality." The poet goes to the extreme of daring when he wants to emphasize the undefinable nature of the ultimate beginning. "The very gods are later to creation. Then who can know from whence it has arisen? Where this creation came from, whether it was really created or not, He who surveys it in the highest heaven, He only knows, or even He does not know it." The courageous honesty with which the question is left open should be noted. Nevertheless, an affirmation is also seen here. It is the ultimate beginning that defies definition. The universe, that which is, is not denied its reality, although the intuitive mind recognises that the contradiction between being and non-being, so valid to the human mind, may cease to be valid in a distant horizon of time beyond the reach of thought. "Searching in their heart with intellect (a beautiful ex-



pression for the combined enquiry by intuition and thought) the sages found the source of being in non-being." Pure static being was stirred by the impulse towards creation and the universe began. "Desire entered the One in the beginning, desire which was the earliest seed of spirit."

Cues from nature itself helped in this intuitive derivation of the finite from the infinite. Space seemed an endless expanse, beyond the earth, beyond the clouds, beyond the sky, and yet visible to the naked eye. This visible Infinite, in which the earth and planets and stars were mere local concretions, suggested Aditi (etymologically, the unbroken, indivisible or infinite), the great mother of the gods. There are not many hymns to her, for nothing much can be said about the infinite by the finite mind. But we do find this pronouncement. "Aditi is the intermediary space. Aditi is the celestial sphere. Aditi is the mother, the father, the son. Aditi is all gods, the five classes of being, the created and the cause of creation."<sup>38</sup> The predication of an invisible power which brought order into the visible world was helped by the fact that something analogous to it could be seen in the action of the winds. They cannot be seen but their presence can be felt from the natural processes which they initiate. In the Atharva Veda, we find a prayer to the winds to send clouds bearing rain which will fill the rivers and make the corn grow in the fields. Even more subtle is the action of the winds on the waters. "When you breathe on them, the waters all become tasteful and medicinal herbs attain potency." Vayu, or air, thus becomes the symbol of the invisible vital energy that sustains the world. "Germ of the world, the deities' vital spirit, this god moves ever as his will inclines him. His voice is heard, his shape is ever viewless."<sup>39</sup> Similar symbolism, at a higher level, posits an invisible being as the ordainer of the visible creation.

This being also seemed to be lifted far beyond the corrosive action of time. Here again an ever-renewed miracle of nature, dawn, gave the Vedic mind a significant cue. The day dies down in dusk deepening into night. But every night gives way ultimately to the glory of a new dawn. This birth of light from the darkness seemed the most natural symbol of the beginning of the universe itself and its ordered procession through time. The world lost in sleep is reawakened by dawn. Its appearance is a life-giving



benediction. The goddess is as old as time, but she is radiantly young at every appearance. "From days eternal has Dawn shone and shows this light again today. So will she shine on days to come. Immortal, she moves on in her own strength, undecaying."<sup>40</sup> If the things of this world pass away, pure being is eternally enduring. The Rig Veda refers to the Mighty Eternal Being.<sup>41</sup> "Years do not age Him; nor months nor days wear out Indra."<sup>42</sup>

If there was any hint of polytheism in the poetically valid plural personifications of the various forms of energy that cooperate to sustain the rhythm of the universe, it completely evaporates now in the grand intuition of a unitary being who is the ground and focus of creation. "They speak of Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni. The One Existence the wise call by many names as Agni, Yama, Matariswan."<sup>43</sup> This truth is proclaimed again and again. "Agni is but That, Aditya is That, Vayu is That, Moon is That. Light is That, Brahman is That, Waters are Those. Prajapati is He."<sup>44</sup> The play with singular and plural numbers (That, Those) and neuter and masculine genders (That, He) is deliberate, for establishing the unity behind the plurality of appearances and the variety of their forms.

Polytheism sees the imprint of God's footsteps in every manifestation of nature, in river and forest, in sun and moon. But it too frequently degenerates into animism. Monotheism may be a higher concept, but the One God has been too frequently a jealous tribal deity. The Vedic mind avoided both these dangers by finding an aesthetic solution to the problem. Metaphysical thought asserted the unity of godhead, but the poetic imagination won the freedom to conceive it in various forms, in harmony with the plural beauty of the world itself. It is clear beyond any ambiguity that the whole approach was poetic. "The Beautiful-Winged, though He is one, the wise poets shape, with songs, in many figures."<sup>45</sup>

From these perceptions emerge a richly orchestrated affirmation of God as the creator and sustainer of the universe. The visible finite is derived from the invisible infinite and an image of almost surrealist power is used to express this perception—a tree with roots above and branches growing downward. "In the limitless region, King Varuna, of hallowed power, holds erect



the tree's stem. The root is high above and the branches stream downward. May they sink within the secret recesses of our own being."<sup>46</sup> God is the ground of the universe. "The sage beholds that mysterious existence wherein the universe comes to have one home. Therein unites and therefrom issues everything."<sup>47</sup> Earth is our mother and when the poet comes to sing of God as the creator of the earth specifically, his melody becomes even more poetic. "Thou who by Eternal Law hast spread about flowering and seed-bearing plants and streams of water, Thou who hast generated the matchless lightnings in the sky, Thou, vast, encompassing vast realms, art a fit subject for our song."<sup>48</sup> God is the creator not only of external nature or of organic existence, He is also the inspirer of the mind. The earlier hymn prayed for the epiphany of the Divine Spirit in the secret recesses of man's being. Here, human instincts are traced back to God along with inorganic and organic creation. "Varuna has spread the vista in forests, put vigour in horses, milk in kine, set wise instincts in hearts, the sun in heaven and the Soma plant on the hills."<sup>49</sup>

Science seeks the answer to the question how processes take place. Why they take place, why the universe, earth and man should have been created, are questions that go far beyond its scope to a mystery for which man has not yet found an answer. Tentative answers have been given, but we can evaluate only their poetic quality. Testing their truth is beyond us. Some of the most poetic answers are offered by the Vedas. Activity is of two kinds: as means to a goal external to itself; as an end in itself. Utilitarian activity belongs to the first type. We work to earn a livelihood. Play belongs to the second type. Play involves strenuous work for body and mind, but it is an end in itself. Aesthetic creation is a higher mode of the same category. The work itself brings joy and is therefore its sufficient motivation. It always indicates the welling of energy that seeks creative outlet. The Vedas use this perception to seek a tentative answer to the mystery of creation. At one place, God is called a dancer.<sup>50</sup> Dancing is the beauty of movement. Pure Being may be static, but in creation, Being becomes rhythmic Becoming. God is also called the Poet. "He who is the supporter of the worlds of life, He, Poet, cherishes manifold forms by his poetic power."<sup>51</sup> Each individual manifestation of energy is an aesthetic configuration, valid in its own



terms. Poetic sensitiveness sees both the unitary meaning and the plurality of forms without the slightest mutual contradiction. This resolution of the apparent dualism in the unity of poetic experience is projected back and creation itself is seen as poetic creativity. The pure inwardness of the act of creation is stressed through a bold image. A potter can also be said to create a beautiful vase. But here he has to rely to some extent on some material. A poem or a song, on the other hand, seems a transformation, a creative moulding, of one's being itself. Being becomes Becoming through a spiritual act, a ritual sacrifice, where its pure, static existence is willingly offered up as oblation by the Infinite so that it can manifest itself as the finite world. "Of the sacrifice that the gods prepared with Purusha (Being) as the oblation, spring was the butter, summer the firewood and autumn the offering."<sup>52</sup>

God  
through  
the  
medium  
appears

The universe, thus, is not an alienation from God. He continues to be its pervasive, presiding spirit. "This earth is the dominion of Varuna, the king, and the high heavens whose boundaries are distant. Both the seas are in his loins, yet in this drop of water also he is present."<sup>53</sup> To each order of creation, God has assigned its realm. "It is you who have fixed their realm in water for aquatic life. The wild beasts have spread over the steppes. The woods belong to the birds. None of them transgresses the laws of Savita."<sup>54</sup> He is the god of the wilderness as well as of the inhabited land, of the season of the tender sprout as of the season of the dry leaf. "Obeisance to the lord of the salt-marsh, as well as the good road, of the rocky as well as habitable ground, of the cattleshed and the house, of the couch and floor, of the jungle and cave, of the waters of lakes and snow, of the sound and the dust, of the dry logs and green woods, of the grass and shrubs, of the earth and rippling water, of the green leaves on the trees and the withered ones on the ground."<sup>55</sup> Finally, the divinity of God does not exclude his presence among men. Nor is he an exclusive god of one group, but of the whole of humanity. "Varuna is that in which things converge; He is that from which things diverge. God is the compatriot; He is the stranger. Varuna is divine; He is also human."<sup>56</sup>

Ethical concepts also begin to be built into this grand perception of the unitary focus of creation. God is the president of



eternal laws.<sup>57</sup> God on high is also close at hand to see every one of our deeds. "Whoever stands or walks, whoever moves in secret, who goes to his lying down or his uprising, Varuna his movements traces. What two men, sitting together whisper to each other, He, the king, knows. He is the Third present there."<sup>58</sup> Varuna is the god of mankind, not of a particular group. The closed, in-group ethical mentality is impossible with this broadened vision. Sins against the stranger are as serious transgressions as sins against the neighbour. "If we have sinned against the man who loves us, have ever wronged a brother, friend, comrade, the neighbour ever with us, or a stranger, O Varuna, remove from us the guilt." It is very important to note here that man is not goaded into ethical conduct by the fear of punishment but drawn to it because only the pure can be dear to God. Guilt brings a troubled sense of alienation from God. "What hath become of our ancient friendship, when without enmity we walked together? If he, thy true ally, hath sinned against thee, still, Varuna, he is the friend whom once you loved."<sup>59</sup> Pure and movingly tender is this prayer. "Cast all these sins away like loosened fetters, Varuna, and let us be thine own beloved."

There is nothing in the later literature expressive of the close embrace of God and the human spirit which is not anticipated in Vedic poetry. God is the dearest guest, bosom friend.<sup>60</sup> "He is our father, our progenitor, our friend."<sup>61</sup> Superlatives are frequently used to exalt the bond. God is the fatherliest of fathers, motherliest of mothers. Tender in its sentiment and imagery is this appeal. "Stay still, O Bountiful One! Do not go away . . . With the sweetest song, I grasp thy garment's hem, as a child grasps his father's."<sup>62</sup> God is conceived of both as lover and beloved, husband and wife. "Like the husband to the wife, may God, the upholder of the heavens, Lord of all bliss, turn towards us."<sup>63</sup> Elsewhere, God is compared to a chaste wife beloved of the husband, or like a wife in a household, an ornament to all.<sup>64</sup> The Vedic movement towards theism may be dualistic at this stage, but as in the later Vaishnavite movement, the duality is forgotten in a close embrace. "Thou art ours and we are Thine."<sup>65</sup>



*IV. Intuition of Eternal Law*

Poetic sensibility had created the myth out of the grand rhythms of nature's life. Religious intuition deepened the myth and arrived before the presence of God, conceived with poetic validity as a Person. The mind and heart did not stop here. They renewed the upward flight and attained the vision of an impersonal order, which integrated inorganic and organic existence and psychological life as one unified realm of law.

A famous Rig Vedic hymn<sup>66</sup> stresses the pervasive presence of God. "As light He dwells in the luminous sky. As air He dwells in the mid-space. As fire He exists in the sacrificial altar. As a guest He exists in the house. As life He exists in man. As order He exists everywhere. As Supreme Entity He exists. He shines in sacrifices, in the sky, in water, in light, in mountains and in Truth." The profound implications here must be clearly understood. The basic attribute is Being. The Supreme Entity exists. Now, Existence is also an order and this order encompasses the whole realm of creation from the inorganic world of air, light and fire to the world of living things, to man and his domestic hearth. In fact, the Supreme Entity is identified with Order.<sup>67</sup> The personal gods derive their strength from this Order. "Gods chant the song of Order."<sup>68</sup> To the sceptics, Indra points to the cosmic order as proof of his own reality. "Some men say. 'There is no Indra. Who has seen him?'" Indra says. "I exist. Look at me here. All that exists I surpass in grandeur. The commandments of Eternal Law make me mighty."<sup>69</sup>

The Vedic poet saw everywhere the evidence of a great order, in obedience to which the stars and sun wheeled in their orbits, the earth rolled through night and day, the seasons came and went and the rivers, after many wanderings, at last found the sea. The moral life of man is but an extension of this order in nature. For the very possibility of human existence depends on the assured regularity of the rhythmic processes in nature. "The waters, they are Law. That is why, when the earth receives waters regularly, everything is in accord with law. But when the rain fails, the strong victimise the weak, for the waters, they are Law."<sup>70</sup> We see here a profound, integrative deepening of the concept of reality or being. The word 'Sat' is reality in the metaphysical sense.



Reality is not brute, disparate, isolated fact. It is an order. God, the ultimate reality, reveals Himself through Rita, eternal order.<sup>71</sup> In nature, this order establishes the steady rhythm of processes. It is that rhythm which makes organic life, and finally the social life of man, possible. Thus, in the sphere of human life, Sat, the real, becomes Satya, truth, or moral integrity. For moral law is the extension of the natural law which organic nature obeys. A failure of natural law will bring about anarchy in nature and render creaturely existence impossible. Likewise, if men do not obey the moral law, social anarchy will threaten the orderly existence of human societies. Both natural law and moral law are the phased manifestation of the Eternal Law which is God. If God is pure being (Sat) in the beginning, in the latest phase of evolution, He becomes truth or moral integrity (Satya). That is why God is called Satya-dharman, "one for whom truth is the law of being", Satya-sava, "one for whom truth is the source of power" and Satyasya Sunu, "son of truth."<sup>72</sup>

This integration makes man realise that moral conduct is expected from him if he is to benefit by the bounties of nature. The Vedic poet prays for the benediction of nature. "May sweet to us be the night and sweet the dawns; sweet the dust of the earth. Sweet be our father the sky to us." But he prefaces the prayer with an acknowledgment of his own obligation. "For one who lives according to Eternal Law, the winds are full of sweetness, the rivers pour sweets. So may plants be full of sweetness for us."<sup>73</sup> Eternal Law is the source of the law of nature, which systematises the great rhythms of nature, and of the moral law, which preserves order in society. A violation of natural law is unthinkable, for it will create cosmic anarchy, the shattering of the solar system, the collision of sun and star. In the case of human beings, the law does not operate automatically, but through the obedience of man. So, moral law can be violated. But the anarchy that would follow will be as terrible as what would happen if we were to imagine natural law to be violated. Therefore, Rita in the moral plane is called "stern and fierce." The wicked perish, shattered, in the great idiom of Aeschylus, against the throne of Eternal Law. Brihaspati rides the awful car of Rita for subduing the foes of light and destroying the wicked.<sup>74</sup>

The Vedic mind clearly perceived that while the statutes of



Eternal Law were automatically fulfilled by insentient nature, the freedom of the human will spelt also danger, since moral action was not automatic and impulses towards transgression had to be fought down by self-discipline. The primitive mind often relies on fear for moral discipline. The moral law is often a command by a fierce tribal god and its violation is believed to bring dire punishment in its wake. The Vedic mind also realises that transgression will bring punishment. But this punishment is not the act of an anthropomorphic deity, of a god conceived as a policeman. It is the result of a weakening of the ground, the very structure of social existence. The ruin is not a lightning blow from above, but a disease sprouting from below. Therefore, the Vedic mind sought within itself the sources of strength for abiding by the moral law, when confronted by temptations. The significance of this psychological approach to ethics should be clearly understood. The spring of all action is the mind and the Vedic prayer seeks to strengthen the mind. "That which is the source of high knowledge and is the intellect and the power of memory, that which is the deathless flame within living beings, without which no action whatever is performed, may that mind of mine will what is good. That which directs man like a good charioteer, directing the horses with reins, that which is established in the heart, may that mind of mine be of good intent."<sup>75</sup> That was a prayer from the Yajur Veda. In the Rig Veda, we read: "Let noble thoughts come to us from every side."<sup>76</sup>

The personalised deities of earth, air and sky become the different forms of the One God from a higher perspective and from still loftier heights, even the One God becomes a personalisation of Eternal Law. The concept of Law becomes a higher concept than that of God. The earth is upheld, we read, not by the will of God, but by truth, of which God is the supreme exponent.<sup>77</sup> This type of outlook has profound implications. It explains how non-theistic systems like Buddhism and the earlier Samkhya could flourish in India. Denial of theism, by itself, was not heretical. What would have been heresy was the denial of Law. Neither Samkhya nor Buddhism denied Law, the categorical imperative towards moral conduct.

Finally, long before Plato, the Vedic mind saw Reality as the embodiment and source of the three ultimate values, truth, good-



ness and beauty. They freely sought God because He was the embodiment of value, not because He could punish. He is the embodiment of truth. "We with our hymns elect today the all-God, Lord of the good, Savita, whose decrees are true."<sup>78</sup> He is the source of all that is good. "Savita, God, send far away all evil. Send us what is good."<sup>79</sup> He is also the source of all that is beautiful. "God, may we obtain all things that are beautiful."<sup>80</sup> The essentially poetic mind of the Vedic Aryans could not but be attracted towards beauty, which, to them, is no illusion but an attribute of the eternal order. "Firm-seated are the foundations of Eternal Law. In its lovely form are many splendid beauties. By Eternal Law they give us long-lasting nurture. By Eternal Law have the worlds entered the universal order."<sup>81</sup> Intuitive, poetic thought completes its perfect circle here. Behind the universe is the Eternal Law. The anarchy of matter settled into order at the dictate of Law. It is this order of nature that nourishes life, makes its survival possible. But it goes beyond. It is also a realm of beauty, lifting human existence beyond the level of mere physical growth to the perception of a loveliness in the world which is a reflection of the beauty of the primordial source from which it originated.



## CHAPTER FOUR

## The Inward Quest

I. *Unity of Being*

BEFORE THE lofty speculations of the Vedic poets were resumed, there occurred a reaction and a revolt against that reaction. The reaction is represented by the Brahmanas which transformed a religion based on poetic insights into a sacerdotal cult.

The early ritual was simple and it created an aesthetic form of worship which corresponded with the poetic quality of the insight. The chanting of hymns, the lustre of the blazing fire, the sweet perfume of the burnt *ghee*, the blades of grass and the crushed Soma juice combined to form a delicately orchestrated form of worship with a sensuous appeal of colour, sound and fragrance. It was also emphasized that the ritual of sacrifice was a symbol of the spirit of sacrifice. "May Yajna (ritual) prosper through Yajna (spirit of sacrifice)."<sup>1</sup> The emphasis laid on the spirit as against external form can be seen in the exaltation of the five great daily sacrifices. "Five are the great sacrifices. They are the great continuous sacrifices: the propitiation of all things created, of human beings, of the forefathers, of the gods, and of the sacred lore. Every one should make offerings to all creatures. Every day one should make gifts, even if it be with only a cup of water. Thus one achieves the propitiation of human beings. Every day, one should, even if it be with only a cup of water, make offerings to his ancestors. Every day one should make offerings to the gods, even if it be only with sacred twigs and fire. Then there is the propitiation of the sacred lore. Learning the Veda is that propitiation. Speech, mind and intellect are the various utensils of this sacrifice. Truth is the final purificatory ceremony. Liberation is the end."<sup>2</sup>

Here, not only is the emphasis on the spirit as against the external form of the ritual, but the individual himself is the agent of the spiritual discipline and ritual action. But, as a class of professional priests arose, they became the conductors of the ritual which also became a structure of elaborate prescriptions needing



thereby the service of this specialised class. There were complicated directives for the selection of the site of the sacrificial fire, the number of bricks with which the altar was to be constructed, the time and place for collecting the materials for the sacrifice, etc.<sup>3</sup> Transformed thus into a complex, specialised profession by the priests, ritual gradually ceased to be a symbolic act enshrining the inspiration of a poetic insight and became a magical act, invested, in popular belief, with a compulsive power which could extort gifts from the gods in return for the sacrificial offering. The glorious poem of invocation became a magical spell where the sound, conceived of as having some mysterious efficacy, displaced the sense in importance. In the place of fragrant *ghee* and green blades of grass, the blood of sacrificed animals began to stain the altar.

If we keep the caution in mind that some Brahmanas are really Upanishads in spirit, we can accept the broad generalisation that the Brahmanas represent this hardening sacerdotalism, while the Upanishads represent the revolt against it and a return to the earlier inwardness. Those who regard the whole Vedic literature as one homogeneous sequence will miss the emphatic opposition to ritualism in Upanishadic thought. There is one passage, for example, in the Chhandogya Upanishad, where this antagonism is given the most uninhibited expression. A procession of dogs is described, marching like priests going to a ceremony, each dog holding the tail of the dog in front. They settle down and begin to chant. "Om, let us eat! Om, let us drink! Om, may the divine Varuna, Prajapati, and Savita bring us food! Lord of food, bring hither food, bring it, Om!"<sup>4</sup>

The Upanishads feel great difficulties in accepting ritual, the spirit of which has been so much vitiated by the professional priests. Their efficacy is seriously doubted. "Verily they are frail crafts—these sacrifices."<sup>5</sup> Then the original high intention is remembered and the Upanishads go back to the great poetic concept of the Rig Veda where the Universe was born through the sacrificial offering of the Eternal Being Himself. The concept is elaborated in detail. The Being is the sacrificial horse. The universe is His body. "Dawn verily is the head of the sacrificial horse. The sun is his eye, the wind his breath. The sky is his back; the atmosphere his belly . . ."<sup>6</sup>



The Upanishads are not interested in ritual as such beyond the restoration of its inward significance, which was obscured by the growth of sacerdotal religion. The whole trend of Upanishadic thought is towards a deepening inwardness. In the Rig Veda, the point of departure is the external world with its sun and sky and clouds, dawn and fire. Vedic intuition finally reaches a God and an Eternal Law behind nature and the Upanishads gain by the fact that this high terrace of thought has already been attained by the prior effort. This enables the Upanishads to probe inward into the mystery that lies at the deep-hidden core of nature and man's being. The creators of the Upanishads sought more and more "a centre of reference in their own consciousness, a subjective counterpart to the objective majesty that had so long held them enthralled in awe, an answer in their own being to the cosmic challenge of the visible universe."<sup>7</sup>

The profoundest inspiration of the Upanishads is the yearning to struggle towards light. "From the unreal lead me to the real! From darkness lead me to light! From death lead me to immortality!"<sup>8</sup> The indebtedness of the Upanishads to the Vedas is very great at every stage, though there is the great further achievement of a real deepening of meaning. Thus, in the Vedas, Savita is "light among blinding darkness, the great Being radiant as the sun beyond darkness."<sup>9</sup> And the great Gayatri Mantra in the Rig Veda uses the concept of light as a symbol of the inner illumination. "We contemplate that adorable glory of Savita, that is in the earth, the sky, the heavens. May he stimulate our mental power."<sup>10</sup> Here Savita is not only the god of physical light but the light that irradiates the mind as well.

And thus the great adventure begins. "What is that by knowing which everything in this universe is known?"<sup>11</sup> The Upanishadic thinkers realise the extremely subtle nature of the problem they have taken up. The sound of a drum seems to fill the air. It pervades the air with its resonance and it seems utterly difficult to trace it to a particular location. Nevertheless, there must be a drum pulsating somewhere. If you can locate the drum, the mystery of the whole air made resonant by unseen vibrations is solved. This is the fine image given by Yajnavalkya in the Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad.<sup>12</sup> Incidentally, this brings to light a very important feature of the Upanishads. The analytical intellect is



very active in these speculations. But it is also accompanied by a poetic sensibility and intuition. In the last analysis, this fine combination is the greatest excellence of the Upanishads. Their final conclusions will have numerous echoes in later ages, in the thought of the Sufis of Islam, in Meister Eckhardt in Europe. But there, expression becomes frequently obscure due to the limitations of language to communicate these high mysteries. The Upanishads also fully realise these limitations. But they make a heroic attempt to conquer the opacity of literary expression, to make it transparent so that we can see through the veil of words the meaning behind. As we shall see, they have incarnated philosophical insights in a rich poetic tissue, studded with resonant idioms, images, anecdotes, parables.

When, looking on all that exists, the Upanishads sought the primordial source of being, they confronted the same difficulty which the Vedas had confronted earlier. At the far horizon of time, it becomes impossible for the mind, with its limitations, to distinguish being from non-being. But if some Upanishadic passages posit non-being as prior to being, it must be clearly understood that the concept does not stand for utter emptiness, void, nescience. It is merely that the Reality, which is prior to the universe in time and transcends it as logical category, is beyond the reach of language and thought which have been evolved through and for the handling of material realities. From it, "words return unattaining, with the mind."<sup>13</sup> The Kena Upanishad reiterates this: "To it no eye can penetrate, nor speech nor thought can ever reach. It rests unknown. We cannot see how any one may teach it to us." Since all attributes are limitations imposed by the mind in order to be able to seize something conceptually, the transcendent reality can be indicated only by the negation of all attributes. "It is neither gross nor minute, neither short nor long, neither shadow nor darkness, neither air nor ether, neither taste nor smell . . . ."<sup>14</sup> It is not a void which Upanishadic thought is asserting here. It is a reality which, however, is beyond the reach of words and concepts. When the mind returns from the ultimate beginning to contemplate the universe as it has evolved, Reality, which originally could be defined only in negative terms, is given positive attributes. The Svetasvatara Upanishad defines Divine Reality in the same stanza as attributeless and also



as the ruler of the universe, the all-pervasive dweller in the heart of material creation and living things.<sup>15</sup>

The most obvious feature of the world is its plurality. The forms of matter have a seemingly inexhaustible variety. Energy also manifests itself in innumerable different forms. The fundamental query—"What is that by knowing which everything in this universe is known?"—can be raised on two planes. On the plane of natural processes, the query leads to science. On the higher, ontological plane, it leads to philosophy. Five or six centuries before Christ, a few brilliant Greeks of Ionia raised this query, first on the plane of nature. This led to the search for the primordial element from which all elements of matter were derived. Thales chose water as the fundamental element. Anaximenes chose air. Heracleitus chose fire, but a very refined sort of fire, an ethereal fire. But the Greek mind had not forgotten that the question could be raised on a higher plane too. The primordial element they isolated and the atoms of primordial matter were instinct with life and latent consciousness, since all nature was divine. The atoms of Democritus had the power of self-movement. This was denied by subsequent science till our own century at last brought new insights. A truth which has never received sufficient emphasis so far is the fact that the Upanishads also contain a similar investigation about the primordial element. In the Taittiriya Upanishad, it is first declared that *anna*, literally food, is Brahman. Here, *anna* is evidently matter. Since the enquiry was for isolating Brahman or Reality, defined as that from which beings have grown and by which they are sustained, there is no initial logical fallacy in regarding matter as the ultimate reality, provided evolutionary capacity is not denied to it. The Rig Vedic hymn of creation<sup>16</sup> had, it would be recalled, propounded the view that the sensible world was the unfolding of the supra-sensible first cause. The primordial element, therefore, is not the dead matter of eighteenth century science, but the matter instinct with life of the Ionian Greeks and of contemporary science which concedes that the ultimate particles of matter have the power of self-movement. The Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad regards water as the primordial element, the Chhandogya opts for air, and the Katha Upanishad selects fire. In another passage the Chhandogya regards space as the primordium



of the material world. Empty space is the visible infinite and its selection is guided by the memory of the Vedic finding that the finite world arose from the infinite, being from non-being. The choice of any particular form of matter as the primordium is not very important. What is important is the recognition that matter is invested with evolutionary capacity. The Kausitaki and the Taittiriya Upanishads bring this out very clearly. The Kausitaki starts by positing Prana or air as the primordial element. But very swiftly, Prana is progressively identified with life, with consciousness and with the Self itself, the ultimate reality which is ageless and immortal. Thus, Prana, which is originally a form of matter, becomes identified with life from the biologic point of view, consciousness from the psychological and the Self from the metaphysical points of view.<sup>17</sup> The Taittiriya similarly progresses from matter to life and mind. Above the mind it posits a higher reason. Probably the mind stands here for sensation and instincts, while reason stands for the capacity for abstract and discriminatory thought which distinguishes man from animals. The Taittiriya does not stop here, but goes on to a still higher level, the highest in fact in its hierarchy. This is the bliss, which is the trait, the very nature, of the highest reality.<sup>18</sup>

Brahman, the ultimate reality and Atman, the soul, are the two terms of the great equation which the Upanishads will formulate. Let us study the conceptual clarification of the first term. The Isa Upanishad defines Brahman as the Being who exists unmoved, yet moving swifter than the mind. He is far, and yet near, within this universe. He is the support of all vital action. The Katha Upanishad states: "As the one fire, entering the world, assumes many forms, according to each form that it burns, as the one wind entering the world assumes forms according to each form it enters, so also the One that is the inner self of all beings assumes forms according to each form that it enters and also exists outside that form as well." As the mighty tree grows from the minute seed, the universe grows out of the Brahman. As a pinch of salt dropped into water pervades the whole of the water, so Brahman pervades the whole universe.<sup>19</sup> He is smaller than the smallest particle and bigger than the biggest magnitude in the universe.<sup>20</sup> He is the ultimate ground and support of the universe. "All shine after His shining. By His splendour all the world is splendid."<sup>21</sup>



Along with homely similes, the Upanishads use parables and stories to clarify their message. There is a beautiful story in the Kena Upanishad to bring out the point that the Brahman is the ultimate source of power in the world. Brahman won a victory for the gods, who glorified themselves at this victory of Brahman. They thought: "Ours is this victory, ours indeed this glory." Brahman understood their mind and appeared before them. They did not know who it was. They asked Agni to find out who this being was. Brahman asked Agni. "Who are you? What is your power?" Agni said. "I am fire. I can burn up everything in this world." Brahman put a straw before Agni and asked him to burn it. He rushed toward it with all speed but could not burn it. Other elemental powers similarly approach with confidence and go away powerless. Indra, the greatest of the gods, now arrives himself. But Brahman disappeared without even accosting him. Indra saw in that space an exceedingly beautiful damsel and asked her: "What is this venerable thing?" She replied. "Brahman. It was at His victory that you glorified yourselves."<sup>22</sup>

Brahman is the answer to the query: "What is that by knowing which everything in the universe is known?" It is possible to know the universe by knowing Brahman, "as by knowing one lump of clay, all that is made of clay is known; for the modification is but an effort of speech, a name, and the only reality in it is clay."<sup>23</sup> For it is Brahman "from whom indeed beings are born, through whom they live and unto whom they return and merge."<sup>24</sup> We get an emanatory theory of cosmogony in the Upanishads. Desire awakes in the One to be the many, in the infinite existence to be a finite series of historical existence. "Brahman desired: 'Let me be many, let me multiply.' He reflected and after reflection He projected all this—whatever there is. Having projected it, He penetrated into that very thing, and became the gross and the subtle."<sup>25</sup> The order of manifestation is worked out thus. "From the Brahman the ether was produced, from the ether air, from air fire, from fire water, from water the earth."<sup>26</sup> Science today has realised that prior to the evolution of living matter, there was an evolution of inorganic matter, the creation of elements from particles, of compounds from simple substances, of liquids from gases and of solids from liquids. In



fact it is this evolution of matter that enabled life to appear. Those who see a divine purpose in evolution extend it to the inorganic evolution prior to the organic evolution. Those who regard evolution as a casual series of accidents apply the same explanation to both organic and inorganic evolution. Here, the Upanishads intuit the evolution of matter, though their classification of matter into five primordial elements is schematic and archaic. They go further and assert that this evolutionary sequence is an emanation from Brahman. The same Upanishad goes on to express this with the help of beautiful imagery. "As a spider projects and withdraws its web, as herbs grow on earth, or hair comes on a living person, so does this universe here proceed from the Immutable."<sup>27</sup> Creation has also been compared to sparks coming out of a blazing fire. "As sparks, similar to itself, come out of a blazing fire by the thousands, so various creatures come out of the undecaying One and also return to it."

2) The second term in the great equation of the Upanishads is the Atman or the individual soul. Here the thought progresses by eliminating the apparent dualism in two planes. In the lower plane, the initial opposition that confronts the mind is the dualism of mind and body. "From earth arose the breath and blood, but whence is the Atman? ... Am I really this physical body? ... I am not clear in mind and wander about in doubt and bondage."<sup>28</sup> This thinking aloud is from the Rig Veda. The Upanishads take up this question and ultimately arrive at an organismic concept which integrates body and soul. "The wind is bodiless. Cloud, lightning and thunder—these are bodiless. Now, as these, having risen up from yonder space and having reached the highest height appear each with its own form, even so this serene self, having reached the highest light, appears with its own form."<sup>29</sup> Defining the soul initially as the inner energising principle of the organism, the entire tradition of biological science will find it difficult to accept an absolute dichotomy of body and spirit and will prefer their organismic integration. Therefore, this statement seems, at least to the present writer, far more balanced and acceptable than passages elsewhere in the Upanishads which seem to indicate a dichotomy. Here the spirit is the energy manifested by the body when it is perfected as a functional organisation. This organismic concept is emphasized elsewhere also. "Know the soul as the



rider, the body as the chariot, the intellect as the charioteer and the mind as the reins. The organs are the horses and the sense objects the roads for them. The soul with the body, organs and mind is designated by the sages as the experiencer.<sup>30</sup>

The next problem is the relation between the individual and God, Atman and Brahman. Here, we must reject the assumption usually made that the Indian tradition is monistic while the Jewish Christian tradition of Europe is dualistic. There have been monists like Eckhardt in Europe and dualists like Ramanuja in India. The Upanishads are the products of many thinkers and we can find the sources of both dualism and monism in the Upanishads. Perhaps, at the highest level of dualism there is no significant difference from monism, for an intimate embrace is close to an identity.

Both dualism and monism start with a drawing near to God, with the feeling of His presence within one's own being. "The wise who see Him as dwelling in our soul, theirs is the abiding peace," says the Katha Upanishad. He is the "inner guide," who guides all beings within.<sup>31</sup> God is the being with positive attributes who dwells in the heart-lotus of man.<sup>32</sup> Like a king who rules a kingdom of many regions and people of different types from his capital, Brahman, from within the heart of man, rules the organism with its sensory and motor organs, mind and intellect. Brahman is not yet identified with Atman. The objective is to attain to him. The Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad indicates the God-intoxicated ecstasy which can be attained even on the basis of dualism, or perhaps only on the basis of dualism, since an embrace needs two persons, as would become clear in later Vaishnavite poetry. "O Sambhu, You are my soul. My intellect is your consort, Girija. My vital powers are your attendants. My body is your temple. The way in which I enjoy the things of the senses is your worship. My sleep is the state of your contemplation in deep trance. My wanderings are circumambulations of you. All that I talk is praise of you. Whatever I do, all that is worship of you."

The dualism gradually becomes an apparent difference in an essential unity. This is brought out by a beautiful parable. "Two birds of beautiful plumage (soul and God) who are friends and ever inseparable, cling to the same tree (the body). One of them



(the Atman) eats sweet fruits (experiences the results of its past work). But the other only watches, without eating. Buried in the self-same tree (wholly identified with the body) the soul is overwhelmed by his impotence and suffers. But when he beholds the other, the Lord, the adorable One, and the glory (the world) as His, he is free from grief.”<sup>33</sup> Since God is the abiding inner spirit in creation, He dwells within man too. The Svetasvatara Upanishad says, “As oil is found in linseeds, butter in curd, water in riverbeds full of sand, so, he who seeks the Self with truth and austerities, finds it in himself.” The Prasna Upanishad gives an effective image. As long as there is water in a lake, a reflected image of the sun is present there. But if the water drains away, only the real sun remains. Likewise, when the world fills the consciousness, duality lingers. When the obsession with the world is shed, the Atman is revealed as the Brahman. The Chhandogya provides an even more subtle image. The existence of a pot outlines a definite area of space within it. But this space is a part of the external space. When the pot is shattered, no distinction lingers, only a continuous space remains.

And thus the Upanishads move to their great equation. In the Chhandogya, after pointing to the example of the seed from which the mighty tree grows, Aruni tells his son, Svetaketu, that the world grew out of Brahman and concludes, “Thou art that.”<sup>34</sup> The Mandukya, Brihad Aranyaka and Aitareya Upanishads echo this. “The Atman is the Brahman . . . The individual soul is the Absolute . . . I am Brahman . . . Consciousness is Brahman . . .”

## II. *Psychological Analysis*

So far, the movement in the Upanishads is a continuation of the essentially poetic approach of the Vedas. But the specific, additional contribution of the Upanishads is the deepening of poetic sensibility with subtle intellectual analysis. Intuition is not displaced by thought. But thought mobilises the support of analysis for intuitive perceptions.

When they seek the Atman, the Upanishads are trying to clarify the functional centre of being, the pivot round which physiological and psychological capacities and functions are patterned as a perfectly orchestrated system. The Kena Upanishad



raises the query "Under whose lead does the understanding go to its object? Under whose lead does the vital power, the chief of the internal organs, perform its work?"

The advanced research of modern times in the functioning of the nervous system has shown that sensory signals relayed from the external world through the nerves need not emerge into consciousness even when they reach the highest coordinating centres of the brain. The eye receives a light signal from an external object and the signal travels to the brain through the nerve channels. Now, it is true that if the visual centre (cortex) in the brain is destroyed or paralysed by drugs, no visual sensation will emerge. But it has also been demonstrated that the mere arrival of the impulse in the brain centre does not lead to conscious sensation of sight. For conscious perception necessarily involves a factor of attention. There are what are called thresholds for sensation. A sound or light signal of particular strength which is ordinarily adequate for penetrating into our awareness will fail to do so if our mind is absorbed in something else. If we are on the alert for these signals, on the other hand, the thresholds are lowered. Even weak light and sound signals are then noticed, though ordinarily they would have escaped notice. Thus conscious perception necessarily involves a factor of attention and attention presupposes interest, which in turn involves the affective and conative aspects of mental activity. To be perceived, effects of external stimuli must in some way be linked up with the subjective side of experience, that is, with the idea of self. The core of being, the subjective centre, has the august power of denying or granting audience to these signals from the external world. Only when it consents to be activated does a physical signal, transmitted by channels which are physiological and therefore physical, become conscious sensation and perception. All this brilliant insight is enshrined cryptically, but with no possibility of ambiguity, in the definition of the Atman as "the ear of the ear, the mind of the mind, the vocal organ of the vocal organ, the vital force of the vital force, the eye of the eye."<sup>35</sup>

This centre of being is a dynamic reality, not a static entity. That is, it is not localised as an organ but pervades the whole organism as an integrating principle. The problem now is to find out whether this integrative action is real, whether, in fact, this



principle is there throughout the entire range of man's inner life. Consciousness, for instance, oscillates between the waking state and unconscious deep sleep through the state of slumber when dreams take place. Does deep sleep eclipse the Atman? The Upanishadic answer is that the soul is the enjoyer of sleep. In the waking state, the soul operates at the level of sensory experience and it is the factor of its attention that decides whether sensory stimuli lead to actual sensation. The waking spirit can also be unconscious of particular stimuli. Likewise, at the opposite pole, the mind may sleep, but the Atman is the relisher of sleep. In between is the dream state where the sensory channels are for the moment suspended, but the mind is active with its memory images. The Atman moves serenely between the three states, limited by none of them, ever active as the agent that relishes all of them.

The Atman is thus said to be operative in three levels of organismic life, to occupy three abodes in man, the senses, mind and heart, to which respectively correspond the three conditions of waking, dreaming and deep sleep. Superb imagery is used to describe the Atman in the three states. In the waking state, the Atman is acting on the immediate external reality, selecting stimuli from the great external world for notice and reacting to them through the motor organs of the body. In dreaming, the sensory and motor functions are suspended, but the personal centre operates through the mind which recalls its memories and desires. "Leaving its lower nest in breath's protection and upward from that nest soaring wherever it lists, it roams about, the golden-pinioned bird of the spirit."<sup>36</sup> Then follows an account of the dreamless state. "As a falcon or an eagle, having flown about in the air, folds together its wings and prepares to alight, so the soul hastes to that condition in which, asleep, it feels no desire and sees no dream."<sup>37</sup> The soul as active agent suffers no eclipse in any of the three states, not even in deep sleep. It moves from the waking state to deep sleep through the dream state and back, like a great fish that travels from one side of the river to the opposite side, swimming with the current and against it as suits it.<sup>38</sup> But it is in deep sleep that its essential nature comes out most clearly. "This is its essential form, in which it rises above desire, is free from evil and without fear. For as one embraced



by a beloved woman knows not of anything without or within, so the soul merged with the Self knows not of anything without or within."<sup>39</sup>

Upanishadic thought brilliantly synthesises this psychological analysis of the states of consciousness with its ontological and cosmogonic speculations. The Atman is the Brahman. Therefore the levels of action of the Atman in experiencing the world correspond to the levels of action of the Brahman in creating the world. In deep sleep, we are far away from the world of plural entities with their distinction of name and form. On first waking, we only get a general impression of the external world, a simple, not complexly structured, awareness. When wide-awake, we experience the plural forms of the world. The Chhandogya states that, likewise, the universe was originally Brahman, pure being, which evolved later into the undifferentiated matrix of matter and lastly into the world with its many differentiated forms.<sup>40</sup>

Looked at chronologically, creation is the transformation of absolute existence into historical existence which latter resolves itself into a series in time. Looked at logically and ontologically, the hierarchy of the levels of operation of Brahman is a hierarchy simultaneously existing at any moment of time. For absolute being is not emptied out in creation. It continues as the transcendental ground of the universe even when it is active as the immanent evolutionary principle of creation. Therefore, the Atman need not wait for the time series to close, for the involution of the universe back into Brahman, for realising its self-identity with Brahman. For the Atman is not an entity existing in time or tracing the parabolic curve of origin, growth and decay, which is the fate of material things. The Upanishads, therefore, take up now the question of the discipline and technique by which the Atman can realise its identity with Brahman.

Intuition can be pre-reflective and post-reflective. Pre-reflective intuition is vague in its indication, unreliable in its finding. The fact that the Upanishads rely so much on intellectual analysis shows that they regard the intellect as higher than pre-reflective intuition. But, the intellect, working as it does on the data of the senses, looks outward and there comes a time when the outward exploration has given all it can of indirect indications about the ultimate reality. "Not by learning is the Atman attained, not



by genius and much knowledge of books . . . Let a man renounce learning and become as a child . . . Let him not seek after many words, for that is mere weariness of tongue."<sup>41</sup> Some other means have to be adopted for a direct rapport. "Brahman pierced the openings of the senses so that they turned outwards. Therefore man looks outward, not inward into himself. Some wise man, however, with his eyes closed, and wishing for immortality, saw the self behind."<sup>42</sup>

Intuition, that takes up the quest beyond the terminal of the intellect, is now the road. In concentrated meditation, intuition travels up the hierarchy of levels on which the Atman operates. The body is not the highest centre. Nor is the mind, for, to the Upanishads, the mind is merely the body seen from within, an organ like any sense organ, though of a higher type. At its deepest level, the Atman is the silent and formless depth of being within us. At this great depth, the Atman is part of the Brahman, the ground of being, for the superstructure of mental powers and bodily organisation all belong to the periphery that is shallow and does not extend to this depth. The technique of meditation traces in reverse the path of the Brahman in the evolution of the world and the path of the Atman in the involvement with the world. The consciousness gets progressively displaced from the waking state, filled by the objects of the external world, to the dream state, which allows the free movement of the mind and then to the deep sleep state in which the distinction between meditating subject and meditated object disappears.

One difficulty appears at this stage. In the reflex acts of daily life, as when a hand jerks to chase away a fly that has settled on it, the action is not conscious. Likewise, but at a deeper level, in normal living, the serenity of sleep is not a consciously relished serenity. It is relished only in retrospect, on waking. The position that since every man sleeps, he is in rapport with the Brahman every day, can be extremely naive. Just as, in reflex action, we can be an agent of action without being aware of acting, we enjoy sleep without being aware of enjoying it during sleep. The meditative discipline, on the other hand, is for enlarging the frontiers of consciousness, or deepening its level. There is also a paradox involved here. The state of deep sleep is an unconscious state. The demand therefore is that we should be consciously relishing



this unconsciousness. All this led the Upanishads to posit a fourth, highest, stage beyond the three levels of waking, dreaming and deep sleep. This is the Turiya state. This is a transcendent state and the paradoxes that are valid in ordinary existence disappear here. But it is intractable to definition and can at best be described only by the negation of all attributes characteristic of the other three states. The state is described thus: "Having neither external, nor internal experience, nor both combined, nor mere consciousness either, neither conscious nor unconscious, invisible, incapable of being dealt with or seized, without indications, unthinkable, unnamable, to be traced only through the abiding notion of the one self, where the phenomenal world is at rest, serene, gracious, free from duality, it is the final state. That is the Atman, that is to be known."<sup>43</sup> Here, consciousness becomes the Dweller on the Peak of Being (*Kutastha*). At this level, the Atman is identical with the unconditioned Brahman. Since this highest truth is not reached by the intellect, it is not communicable by discourse. Only individual experience can test its truth. "I have known this Mighty Being," claims the Yajur Veda<sup>44</sup> and the Svetasvatara Upanishad<sup>45</sup> reiterates this claim of direct, personal experience by quoting the verse.

### *III. Return to the World*

The great excellence of the Upanishads lies in the fact that their thought is an integrated structure, a coherent system. The evolution of the world from pure being to material existence and the descent of consciousness from the peak of being to participation in phenomena are seen as aspects of the same process. Now, ethical life is also integrated as a functional derivation from this world-outlook. A story in the Chhandogya Upanishad<sup>46</sup> manages this integration with superb artistry. Prajapati, the teacher of the gods, taught: "The Self (Atman) who is free from evil, from old age, from death, from hunger, from thirst, whose desire is the Real, whose objective is the Real—he should be sought after. He obtains all worlds and all desires, who, having found out that Self, knows him." Tempted by the possibility of obtaining all desires and all worlds, Indra, the god, and Virochana, the demon, approach Prajapati and request him to show them this Self. Praja-



pati tests them by stating that the Self is man's personality discernible to the sense organs. They are asked to look into the reflecting surface of a pan of water and they report that they see their selves in their entirety in the water. They are asked to deck their body with ornaments and look again. Virochana sees this decorated form and is satisfied that the body is the self. He goes back and teaches this doctrine to the demons. One's bodily self alone is to be made happy. This is the self to be served. Indra, however, notes in course of time that though the decorated body is beautiful, it is liable to disease and he is not satisfied with a self that is thus liable to injury. By progressive trial and error he realises the significance of the dream state and deep sleep and finally arrives at the knowledge of the transcendent Self.

Here, Virochana's hedonism is derived from an erroneous identification of the Self with the body. The person who has progressed to a profounder conception of the Self, on the other hand, does not have to hate the body. But, instead of deifying it, he uses it as an instrument. The Katha Upanishad calls the body a chariot which the spirit uses for its journey towards self-realisation. That is, life in the world is guided by the ultimate objective that reaches beyond the horizon of material existence. Ethics, therefore, is derived from the metaphysical world-view. The pull of pleasure is noted. But what is pleasant may not always be the good. "It is well with him who accepts the good," says the Katha Upanishad. "One who has not stopped from evil conduct, who is not tranquil and self-controlled, whose mind is not at peace, cannot obtain God by mere knowledge." Intellectual analysis has its great contribution to make. But at last, it has got to be followed up by moral integrity. In the Chhandogya, there is an allegory of a Soma sacrifice on life where the ritual fee to be paid is five fold—the five virtues of asceticism, charity, straightforwardness, non-injury to sentient beings and truthfulness.<sup>47</sup>

Ethical life in social groups is supported by two pillars: the order that emerges from a focal centre of power that rewards and punishes; at a higher plane, the strengthening of the social impulses of the individual that enable him to realise that other men are his brethren. Both aspects are organically integrated into the structure of Upanishadic thought. Brahman is both transcendent



and immanent. What sustains social order is Dharma or moral law which is derived from Brahman. It is this power of Brahman that maintains social justice. "Moral Law is the sovereign power ruling over political power. There is nothing higher than Moral Law. Even the weak can overcome the strong with the help of Moral Law as with the help of a king."<sup>48</sup> The conviction that there is a moral order operating in the affairs of men acts primarily as a restraint. But as the socialisation of the individual progresses, law is interiorised and restraint is transformed into a positive attitude of kinship, when the grand unity of being is realised. "Whoever beholds all living creatures as in Him and Him—the Universal Spirit—as in all, henceforth regards no creature with contempt," says the Isa Upanishad.

The realisation of the unity of being is not automatic and can only be the fruit of self-discipline. And the technique of discipline, the Upanishads realise, has to be adopted to the psychology of the individual, as the mental make-up varies with men. In a beautiful story in the Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad, the gods, men and demons approach Prajapati for instruction in self-discipline. The gods are endowed with power and suffer no want. Their danger is the heady intoxication of power and privilege. So Prajapati asks them to practise self-restraint. Man is always harassed by the conflict between wants and limited resources for their satisfaction. This insecurity makes him selfish. Therefore Parajapati asks men to practise charity, so that the social habit stemming from a divine command will at last make them feel the wants of others as keenly as they feel their own needs. The demons symbolise tremendous reservoirs of extravert energy. The danger here is that this energy will be coupled with selfish impulses and will thus lead to an aggressive onslaught on the others. So Prajapati asks them to adopt compassion as their highest ideal.

The transcendence of the creaturely state is the ultimate terminal of the spiritual journey. The mortal becomes immortal. But the sense in which immortality is used must be clearly understood. It does not mean physical survival or the survival of the soul as a distinct entity. It means freedom from passion and vexing desire. "When every passion that nestles in the heart vanishes, then man gains immortality, then Brahman is obtained by him."<sup>49</sup> More positively, it is the enjoyment of the bliss of



pure being. "He is indeed bliss, and the soul realising this bliss becomes full of bliss."<sup>50</sup> The Chhandogya gives a beautiful image for the merging. The honey in the bee hive is gathered from many flowers. But the essences of the various flowers do not exist separately in the drop of honey. "As flowing rivers disappear in the sea, losing their name and form, thus the sage, released from name and form, is merged in the divine spirit."<sup>51</sup>

Here, there is not the slightest indication to suggest that the final realisation means the survival of the soul. At the depths of being, the soul becomes merged with the Brahman which is timeless, beyond the level of birth and death. The vicissitudes of the body become irrelevant here. Brahman is the sole reality. The individual soul is like the image of the sun in a pool which disappears when the pool gets dried up. But the drying up of the pool does not affect the sun. However, the later Upanishads show a serious deviation from this position. Belief in transmigration, the concept of the world as an illusion and the pessimistic rejection of the world are the features of this change in view.

Buddhism takes transmigration for granted and the belief has a strongly pessimistic colouring, for the ultimate liberation is cessation from the chain of births. It may be that this belief is very old. In one passage of the Rig Veda, the soul is spoken of as departing to the waters or the plants. But the meaning here is rather obscure and there is no other reference in the Vedas which can be interpreted as indicating a belief in transmigration. The Upanishads are also generally free from it. But, passages in the Chhandogya and the Brihad Aranyaka suggest the belief that the soul after the death of the body dwells for a time in the world of the departed spirits and then returns to the earth to be born again. "As a goldsmith takes the material of an image and hammers out of it another newer and more beautiful form, so also the soul, after casting off the body, creates for itself another and more beautiful form."<sup>52</sup>

There is as yet no pessimism here. But we see that the belief has taken a strongly pessimistic colouring by the time Buddhism originated. We do not know as yet the reasons for this wave of pessimism. The revolt of the most intelligent people of the times against the sacerdotal religion of the priests may have led to the loss of power of enlightened religion and primitive beliefs



may have revived and spread. It has also been suggested that the break-up of the old tribes and their replacement by kingdoms wherein ethnic ties and the sense of security they gave were lost or weakened led to a deep-seated psychological unease.<sup>53</sup> Once the belief became well-spread, even the intellectuals found it acceptable, for the elaboration of a causal law of action and effect. The individual suffers many difficulties which are traceable to his own actions. But there are others where this link with his own action is not at all clear. Here the choice was to reject the world as an irrational sequence or to interpret it as a rational order. For the latter, the doctrine of transmigration came handy, for if an individual was seen to receive rewards or punishment, not merited by any action on his own part, a connection with such action in a past life could be posited. But, in this context of history, the pessimism dominates over the rationalism. For the Vedic Aryans had accepted life joyously and there was no intrinsic reason to regard a succession of lives as a burden any more than a single term was a burden. But here we see a strong pessimistic trend. The ebb of life energy is the prior fact. It is that which colours thought.

This pessimism wells up like a dark geyser in the post-Buddhist Maitrayana Upanishad. The world-weary king, Brihadratha, seeks advice from a sage for escape from existence. "In this ill-smelling, unsubstantial body, which is a conglomeration of bone, skin, muscle, marrow, flesh, semen, blood, mucus, tears, faeces, urine, what is the good of enjoyment of desire?" The earlier balanced assertion that the body is the chariot and temple of the spirit is forgotten. "In this body, which is afflicted with desire, anger, covetousness, delusion, fear, despondency, envy, separation from the desirable, union with the undesirable, hunger, thirst, senility, death, disease, sorrow and the like, what is the good of enjoyment of desires?" The truth that the drives to self-assertion and power can be canalised in constructive directions by self-restraint, charity and compassion is forgotten. The world's life is no longer an ordered evolution and involution but an irrevocable descent into decay. "And we see that this whole world is decaying like these gnats, these mosquitoes, this grass, and these trees that arise and perish . . . Among other things there is the drying up of great oceans, the falling away of mountain peaks, the deviation



of the fixed pole-star, the submergence of the earth." If a single life is a curse, a succession of lives becomes a terrible nightmare. "In this sort of cycle of existence, what is the good of enjoyment of desires, when, after a man is satiated with them, he must return again and again? Therefore, rescue me! For I feel in this world-cycle like a frog in a waterless well."

From the belief that wordly existence is an evil, the transition is easy to the belief that the world is an illusion. It is in the Svetasvatara<sup>54</sup>, again a late Upanishad, that we first see the notion that the material world is an illusion, produced by Brahman as a conjuror. The conviction that man is responsible for his salvation is weakened and the doctrine of election raises its head. The Mundaka, another late Upanishad, after stating that the Supreme Spirit cannot be attained through the intellect or learning, declares that He can be attained by him only whom He chooses. "He is obtainable by him alone whom He elects. To him, He reveals His own nature." The phrase "grace of God" occurs frequently in the Svetasvatara also where the Brahman, Pure Being, has become Deva, the personal God. The Maitrayana completes this descending arc by a return to sacerdotal religion. Only those who observe the requirements of Brahmanism, including the rules of caste, are declared capable of attaining salvation.

The classical balance was not completely lost. It is recovered in the late Upanishad, the Mandukya, and in the elaboration of it in the Karika of Gaudapada, which has gained Upanishadic status.<sup>55</sup> The metrical version of the prose text of the Mandukya Upanishad which is incorporated in the Karika makes the definite assertion that the world is not an illusion, but the very nature or essence of Brahman, just as the rays which are all light are not different from the sun. What remains of the doctrine of illusion is given a Kantian statement and resolution. Kant taught that the things of experience are only phenomena and not reality in itself, for we perceive through the sense organs which edit and transform even as they mediate. According to Gaudapada, only reality exists. It is misunderstood, but with the right understanding it reveals itself and the misconception automatically disappears. Just as a rope is mistaken for a snake in the darkness, so the Atman in the darkness of ignorance is mistaken for the world, as a separate entity. Gaudapada gives brilliant imagery to explain



how genesis and plurality seem to exist in the world. If a stick which is glowing at one end is waved about, fiery lines or circles are produced without anything being added to or issuing from the single burning point. The fiery line or circle exists only in the consciousness. So, too, the many phenomena of the world are merely the vibrations of the consciousness, which is one.

This brilliant image is Herecleitean in its intuition of the reality of process. The things of the world are in a state of endless flux, one state succeeding another. Hume interpreted it to mean that there was only a casual succession of states, each of which was fragile, transient, doomed to vanish without a trace. But Heraclitus saw a trend in this sequence, a process taking shape, which welded past, present and future into a significant continuum, an integrated reality that did not perish or fall to pieces with each moment of time but used time to evolve to its full form. Likewise, in Gaudapada also, we find the acceptance of the world as process, but as a process emerging from the activity of pure being or consciousness. As Fry would put it, God in his hour broke the dam which kept His thought and released the spumy cataract birth and death to storm across time and the world.<sup>56</sup>

#### *IV. Germinal Wealth*

Before we pass on to fresh pastures, let us pause a while for a brief retrospect.

Max Muller called the Vedas the first utterance of the Aryan man. It is a rich, orchestrated utterance, as we have seen. Equal in importance to the fully revealed excellences of Vedic literature is its germinal wealth, its rich content of indications and suggestions that will swell into great currents later. Some of these are world-currents. The story of the spread and interaction of Upanishadic ideas in the ancient world is yet to be fully worked out by research. But there are indications that the current flowed to the mystics of Persian Sufism, the mystic logos-doctrine of the Neo-Platonists and the Alexandrian Christians, to the radical doctrines of Eckhardt and Tauler. The rediscovery of the Upanishads by Europe in the nineteenth century profoundly influenced the philosophy of men like Schopenhauer. ✓

Confining ourselves to the Indian scene, we find many germinal



suggestions which would evolve later into full-fledged philosophical and literary currents. When the Brihad Aranyaka compares the final state of self-realisation to the ecstasy of a man embraced by his beloved, we have the germinal idea of the great current of the Vaishnavite lyricism of a later day. The comparison of Soma sporting with the streams to a youth sporting with maidens is the anticipation of the beautiful legend of Krishna and the cow-herd maidens. Even the finer nuances of the devotional cult of a later day are foreshadowed in Vedic literature. Twice in the Rig Veda, we get the fine image of the songs of the poets soaring up to God and kissing and fondling Him as if he were a little child.<sup>57</sup> In the later forms of Indian religion, the conception of the Divinity as a child is found in the 'religion of affection' (Vatsala Rasa) which formed part of the devotional movement. In the Puranas, child Krishna symbolises this idea of the Divinity loved as a child. The tradition spread from Sanskrit into the vernaculars and inspired the tender, moving poetry of men like Surdas in Hindi and Poonthanam in Malayalam.

✓ The excellence of the Upanishads lies in the fact that they conserve the poetic approach and aesthetic sensibility of the Vedas, even when they go on to intellectual analysis. The highest teachings are given in beautiful literary settings, shaped into stories. In the Brihad Aranyaka, we find Yajnavalkya telling his wives Maitreyi and Katyayani that he wishes to settle his property between them, as he wants to leave them for a life of meditation. Maitreyi wants to know whether property and riches will make her immortal. This query initiates the discussion in which Yajnavalkya discourses to her on the highest truths. The Katha Upanishad, likewise, takes off as a quaintly humorous story. A Brahmin was busy in a sacrificial ritual and he was giving away many cows to the priests. His little son, Nachiketas, thought that his father was going to give away everything and pesters his father with the query to whom he was going to donate his son. The father does not take the question seriously, but when pressed, he gets irritated and says that he is going to donate him to Yama, the God of death. The father repents later, but to keep his father's word, Nachiketas decides to go to Yama. When he reaches Yama's abode, Yama is gone out on a journey and the boy has to wait for three days. On his return, Yama regrets his



unwitting lapse from the laws of hospitality and offers the boy three boons as compensation. Answers to questions on the ultimate destiny of the soul are the gifts the boy demands. His third question is whether man exists after death or not. Yama replies. "Even the gods have doubted about this. It is a subtle query. Choose another boon." Nachiketas is offered earthly power and riches if he withdraws the question, but the boy persists. This part of the story, the temptation of Nachiketas to choose the goods of this world in preference to the highest knowledge, is probably the prototype of the legend of the temptation of the Buddha by Mara.

Some of the oldest legends in the world are found in Vedic literature. For instance, the story of a flood, which drowned the whole earth and the entire humanity except for one couple, is seen in the Old Testament and long before that in the lore of ancient Mesopotamia. The Indian prototype of the Semitic Noah and the Mesopotamian Utna-Pishtim is Manu and the story is narrated in the *Satapatha Brahmana*.<sup>58</sup> Though the basic episode of the great flood is common to all the stories, the details are different. One morning, while Manu was washing his hands in the river, he found a little fish cupped in his hands. The little fish requests him to let it grow in his well and tells him of the story of the impending flood. It grows into a big fish and is released into the sea. Then the deluge starts and forewarned by the fish, Manu builds a boat which the fish pulls across the swelling waters to a submerged mountain peak from which the waters ebb first. The conclusion of the story has been adapted for exalting ritual. While, in the Semitic and Mesopotamian legends, a couple was saved, here, Manu is alone. He offers a ritual sacrifice, and from the sacrificial fire a feminine figure takes form, who becomes his wife. Their progeny is the race of man. Another interesting legend is about Matariswan who is described as having brought the hidden fire from heaven to men on earth, like Prometheus in Greek mythology.

The germs of the *Itihasa* or Epic History of a latter period are also found in the Vedas in those passages where episodes, often of conflicts between tribal groups, are narrated. Thus, the rivalry of Viswamitra and Vasishta, frequently recurring in later epics, is already foreshadowed in the *Rig Veda*. Viswamitra was first



the priest of Sudas, a tribal chief, but later he went over to the Bharatas, Vasishta becoming his successor with Sudas, and also his rival. Conflicts between Sudas and the Bharatas were frequent and on one occasion when the Bharatas were blocked by the rivers Beas and Sutlej, Viswamitra made the waters fordable by his prayers. While the battle that followed, in which ten chieftains were against Sudas and five tribes were with him, is the germ of the later epics, the dialogue between Viswamitra and the rivers anticipates the poetic dialogue of drama and the dramatic form itself. The two rivers are described as speeding down from the mountains like two white mares. Propitiating them, Viswamitra says: "I have come to the most mother-like of rivers. We stand beside the broad, auspicious Vipac. Like mother kine fondling their calves together, the two rivers here nourish the same bed." The rivers respond. "Thus we move onward, swelling with our waters, in the course that is by the gods appointed. Our headlong, forward rush no man can hinder. What seeks the singer, calling upon us rivers with loud exhortation?" Viswamitra now makes his appeal. "Listen to the poet's words, my sisters! He comes from afar, with chariot and waggon. Bow down yourselves, be easy to pass over. Let not the water level of your waves touch our axles!" The rivers grant the request. "Unto your words, O poet, will we listen. You come from afar, with chariot and with waggon. I will bend to thy wish, even as a buxom woman. As maid to lover, I will be gracious to you."<sup>59</sup>

Another dialogue in the Rig Veda which later evolved into a full-fledged story and also drama is that between Urvasi, the heavenly nymph and King Pururavas. The Rig Vedic reference is brief and somewhat obscure.<sup>60</sup> From what the nymph says we gather that she had dwelt for four autumns among mortals like a mortal maid. Her lover implores her to return. This request is refused, but he receives the promise of immortality. This cue is developed into a full-fledged story in the Satapatha Brahmana. Urvasi consents to be the wife of Pururavas, the duration of the alliance depending on a peculiar obligation, which the king unwittingly breaks as a result of a trick by the Gandharvas. The nymph disappears immediately. The distracted lover roams the world in search of her, till at last he comes upon her sporting in a lake filled with lotus, along with other nymphs, in



the guise of a swan. She discovers herself to him, and in response to his entreaties, consents to return for once after the lapse of a year. The story would be shaped into a drama by Kalidasa later.

Anticipating the stories of the later Puranas which exalted devotion and affirmed ready response to ardent prayer is the story of Sunassepha. Childless King Harischandra at last gets a son when he took the vow that the boy would be sacrificed to Varuna when he became of age. When the sacrifice is delayed, the king is attacked by a disease. But the son Rohita runs away and persuades a poor Brahmin to offer his son Sunassepha for the sacrifice in return for a gift of hundred cows. Tied to the altar, Sunassepha prays to Varuna. The god is pleased, the ropes that bind him fall one by one and the king is also restored to health.

Folk stories have also come down to us in Vedic literature. A brief and obscure hymn<sup>61</sup> consists of a dialogue between Indra and his wife Indrani on the subject of a monkey which has incurred the anger of the latter. Another poem<sup>62</sup> is a spirited dialogue between Sarama and the demons known as Panis. The Panis stole the cows belonging to Brihaspati, at whose request Indra sends the bitch Sarama to bring back the cows. The Panis try to intimidate her and then try to buy her off by offering to share the herd with her. But the intrepid Sarama stands her ground. Some of the stories are the product of a poetic fantasy, of the type from which fairy stories emerge. Thus, the mountains are supposed to be the oldest children of the first being and were originally winged. "They flew and settled down just where they wished. The earth swayed to and fro because of this. Then Indra cut off the wings of the mountains and made the earth fast. But the wings became storm-clouds. Therefore these always hover in the direction of the mountains."<sup>63</sup> The visual affinity of vast thunder clouds with mountain ranges must have suggested this poetic fantasy. Another poetic tale narrated in the Brahmanas makes the gay secular temperament dear to the Muse of Poetry. Once the gods sent Gayatri to fetch Soma but it was seized by the Gandharvas, the angelic beings who sing and dance. So the gods send Vac (the Muse of poetic utterance) to them to persuade them to part with the elixir. A complication now arises, because the Gandharvas are willing to part with the Soma if the



Muse stays with them. The gods compromise by agreeing that whoever can woo her best can have her. The gods recite the Vedas, the Gandharvas sing them. The Muse turns away from those engaged in praising and praying to those who can sing and dance. More poignant is another poetic legend which explains the origin of night. Yama had died. The gods tried to persuade his wife, Yami, to forget him. But her grief is ever fresh, and since there was no night at that time, she always lamented: "Only today he left me." Then the gods said: "At this rate, she will never forget him. We will create night." The gods created night. Then arose a morrow. Thereupon she forgot him.<sup>64</sup> The soft caress of the night, and the beating of the wings of time, day and night, heal the sorrows of man.

Some of the stories have the naive humour of folk stories while, in the case of others, the humour has a moral. One story is a naive episode with the constant rivalry of the gods and demons as the background. Kanva had married the daughter of an Asura and had two sons by her. Then one day she quarrelled with him about something and went to her parents' house. When he followed her to bring her back, the Asuras put him to a test. They keep him blindfolded and he has to announce when it is day-break. The gods Asvins, invisible to the demons, come to Kanva and tell him that when the day breaks, they will fly over his head beating the tambour. Several times in the night the demons get up and shout that it is day. But Kanva is not fooled. He wins the test and the demons, satisfied that he has remarkable powers of divination, allow him to take back his wife.<sup>65</sup> Another story is a parable. The vital powers quarrel among themselves as to who among them is the most important. Prajapati tells them that that power is the most important whose cessation from function will create the greatest difficulties for the body. Vision, hearing and speech stay away for a time but find on return that though there has been great inconvenience, there has not been any catastrophe. But when breath starts to leave, the other functions realise that they are ineffective without it, recognise it as supreme, and beg it not to leave.<sup>66</sup>

While the intellectual classes were rationalising the caste order, folk literature in India has always stood up for sanity. This great tradition in all the Indian vernaculars goes back to the Vedic



period. The Chhandogya narrates the amusing story of Raikva, the bullock-cart driver who is sitting under his cart and nursing an itch, but who, in the possession of the highest wisdom, is proud as a king. A rich donor of a high caste, Janasruti, approaches him in order to be instructed. Raikva calls him a low-caste and laughs at the presents which the rich man offers him. Only when the latter gives him his beautiful daughter in marriage does he condescend to instruct him. The Aitareya Brahmana narrates another story. Bhṛigu and other sages start a great ritual on the bank of the Saraswati. A low-caste, Kavasha, joins them. The indignant sages expel him to a place far from the bank where no water is available. But Kavasha offers devout prayers and the Saraswati changes her course to flow near him. But the finest story of this type is the one narrated in the Chhandogya. The boy Satyakama (Wedded to Truth), son of a woman of humble circumstances, is in love with learning and wants to go to a teacher. As the teacher would enquire about his family and caste, he wants the particulars from his mother. But she tells him that she had been a domestic servant in various households and that she does not know who his father is. The boy gives this frank reply to the teacher who is satisfied that one so truthful must be a Brahmin.

Lastly, the epic narratives of a later day had a germinal beginning in the *Narasamsa* (Praise of Men) composed in honour of princes on auspicious occasions and in the *Dana Stuti* (Praise of Gifts) which acknowledged their generosity. A composition of the first type opens thus. "The empire has gravitated towards you with glory. Arise, march in front like the chief of the clans, shine forth like the only king! Let all the quarters of space hail you as king. Be the great hero, whom all the world shall serve and revere!"<sup>87</sup> Compositions of the latter type are included among the *Balakhilya* (supplementary) hymns of the eighth Mandala of the *Rig Veda* and are found in the first and tenth books also. Chiefly concerned with enumerating the gifts received, the composers of these panegyrics incidentally furnish historical data about the families and such genealogies, enriched with episodes and stories about the heroes of the past, will later become a characteristic feature of epic poetry.



## CHAPTER FIVE

## Engagement With Social Reality

*I. Ethical Law and Social Control*

THE GREAT insight into life which we find in the Vedas, especially in the Upanishads, was gained by men who had retired to the quiet woods, withdrawing from the eddying currents of life for obtaining a better perspective of it. Meanwhile, society was evolving, in magnitude and complexity. A constant interaction now begins between the hermitage and the civic centre and the insight gained in the retreat evolves into traditions of social control. As a result of this engagement with social reality on the part of thought, a great literature of aphorisms grows up, to be elaborated later into treatises and commentaries. The Srauta Sutras<sup>1</sup> give prescriptions for the civic sacrifices and communal rites. The Grihya Sutras<sup>2</sup> bring the sanctifying grace of ritual to the domestic hearth. Gnostic texts and treatises on Dharma Sastra<sup>3</sup> give detailed guidance on personal and public conduct. Texts in these disciplines continued to be written down to the British days. But the oldest of them go back to the pre-Christian era. The early writers like Gautama, Baudhayana and Apastamba are assigned to the period 600 to 200 B.C. The Manu Smriti<sup>4</sup> is placed between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D.

These manuals were thorough in their social control, their prescriptions ranging from hygienic habits to purity of spirit. Let us begin the day with Gautama. We arise in the last quarter of the night, with a composed mind, casting off sleep. We welcome the new day by remembering the sun about to rise and the lotus which shall open its petals with the dawn. We also remember the abiding source of light of which the sun is only a spark and the lotus of our heart begins to unfold to this invisible sun. The ablutions follow, cleansing the teeth with a green twig of fragrant smell and a bath in river or lake. Such a bath before the actual sunrise, cleanses sins, we are told. But there is a more significant



ablution. "A mental bath is one that is secured by contemplating the all-pervasive Lord of the form of undiminished bliss and knowledge." On the road, Apastamba tells us, the first right of way must be given by all to those dragging loads, invalids and women.

The house, which is a mere shelter, becomes a home, a civilising influence, through the gracious thoughts which these texts inspire in us. When a person leaves his village on a journey, he looks at his house and says: "Do ye both, Mitra and Varuna, protect this house for me . . . Free from danger may we be! May the village entrust me to the care of the forest." While returning he should say, "May the forest entrust me to the care of the village." He is requested not to enter the village without carrying something with him, such as fuel, flowers, etc.<sup>5</sup> Bad shoe-makers must have been as great a problem then as today, to the wayfarer. There is an amusing invocation to the shoe not to pinch.<sup>6</sup> It is the return to the home after a long sojourn that arouses the most domesticated feelings. "I come back to thee, rejoicing in my mind. That of which the traveller constantly thinks, that in which dwells much joy, that I call the house . . . Here are cows, goats and sheep and the sweet companionship of friends." Then he enters the house chanting the spell, "To thee I turn for the sake of safety and peace, O blissful one, O helpful one." The householder is asked to utter auspicious words and avoid all quarrelling on the day he returns.<sup>7</sup>

The Samskaras were the sacraments which sanctified the rhythm of domestic life. Sabara explains the Samskara as that which makes a certain thing or person fit for a certain purpose. And Kumarila<sup>8</sup> says that Samskaras are those rites which impart fitness by removing taints and generating fresh qualities. They synchronised with the inner changes that took place in the individual during growth, conferred a new status on him and impressed upon him the consciousness of a new responsibility. By conferring privilege and exacting duty, they prepared the individual for corporate life. The first feeding of the child with solid food, naming him and the initiation into studies were some of the early Samskaras. The first major sacrament was marriage.

The nuptial rites invest the marital bond with poetry. The bride is washed in the early morning with water that has been



made fragrant with herbs. The Indrani Karma which follows is a dance by four or eight women.<sup>9</sup> The sacramental nature of the bond is ever emphasised. "As a gift from the gods does the husband receive the wife."<sup>10</sup> The bridegroom makes the bride look at the sun, touches her heart, and recites: "Into my will I take thy heart. Thy mind shall follow my mind." He makes her tread on a stone, while he recites the verse: "Tread on this stone, like a stone be firm."<sup>11</sup> In the night, the bride gazes on the Pole Star and other constellations and recites: "May my husband live long and I get offspring."<sup>12</sup>

The later phase shows that the social world is rapidly becoming a man's world and the early equality of man and wife is affected. "Even if a husband is lacking in all virtues, only indulges in sensual pleasures and possesses no good qualities of any kind, he must ever be honoured as a god by a virtuous wife", says Manu.<sup>13</sup> But the disadvantages of women are recognised and it is emphasised that man's responsibility towards her cannot be surrendered. "A wife, even though she be tainted by sin, is quarrelsome, has left the house, has suffered criminal force or has fallen into the hands of thieves, must not be abandoned."<sup>14</sup> In daily life, Manu advocates an enlightened gentleness to women. They are not to be struck "even with a flower." They are not to be watched too strictly, for then their subtlety will find a way to mischief. If they like fine dresses, it is better to indulge them. "If the wife be not elegantly attired she will not exhilarate her husband, whereas when a wife is gaily adorned, the whole house is embellished."<sup>15</sup> Way must be made for a woman, as for the aged or a priest. "Pregnant women, brides and damsels shall have food before all other guests." Even if woman lost some of her status as wife, she gained more than she lost, as mother. "The mother exceeds the father a thousand times in the right to reverence." Where women are honoured, there the gods delight, says Manu, making handsome amends for his patriarchal attitude. Nevertheless, this attitude stiffens. Some of the Grihya Sutras prohibit her participation in major rituals performed publicly and also the study of the Vedas. But Jaimini<sup>16</sup> stands up for her fullest association with Vedic observances. Her legal status, weakened by some of the texts, is restored by Vijnaneswara<sup>17</sup> (eleventh century) and Jimuta Vahana<sup>18</sup> (twelfth century) who strengthen



the legal position of the wife in regard to inheritance and confer on her an extensive proprietary capacity. Maine <sup>19</sup> admitted that even the English Law of 1886 failed to rise to the level of these two jurists in their recognition of woman's legal rights, social values and personal qualities.

But legal disabilities and discriminations emerged in another field, to entrench themselves till recent times. These were the distinctions of caste. It was originally tied up with the racial distinction between Aryan and non-Aryan. As society evolved, it developed into an occupational stratification. But gradually it became a hierarchy of privileges and the burden of the pyramidal arrangement was felt most by the stratum at the bottom. The didactic texts give many instructions which completely block social mobility between the classes and relegate the lower groups to a seriously under-privileged social status. Stentorian voices are often raised against this petrification. Thus, in the *Maha Bharata*,<sup>20</sup> we get the bold statement that there is no distinction of castes. The whole of this universe is divine, having emanated from Brahman. Created as equals by the Supreme Spirit, men have been divided into various groups only on the basis of their aptitudes and occupations.

If Varna or the caste system handicapped social evolution, the *Asrama* system, or the ordering of the stages of life, was the ideal arrangement for getting the maximum meaning out of life, in the light of the physiology and psychology of the stages of growth. The word *Asrama* is from *Srama*, to exert, and means a stage in which one exerts oneself. Since the four *Asramas* completed the round of life, it meant that the system implied a serious attitude towards life with a clear responsibility for every phase of it. In the first stage of life, the individual is primarily a student who lives and learns at his teacher's house. It was quite literally a case of plain living and high thinking, for the students and teachers got their livelihood from the community and the students went on their rounds everyday for collecting alms. This tradition had no reference to the financial condition of either the student or the teacher. It helped them both to practise the ideal of plain living. After completing the studies, the student became a householder, marrying and bringing up a family. In the third quarter of his life, when he saw that his hair was turning



✓ grey and wrinkles were appearing on his body, he retired and became a Vanaprastha, or dweller in the forest retreat. In the last quarter of his life, he put on yellow robes, became a Sanyasi, left a fixed abode, and wandered all over the land as an itinerant teacher.<sup>21</sup>

✓ A controversy emerged on the issue whether this sequence was obligatory or whether, after the initial study of the Vedas, the student could straightaway become an ascetic or monk. The Jabala Upanishad<sup>22</sup> makes the choice optional. Gautama<sup>23</sup> and Vasishta<sup>24</sup> also concede the choice as a matter of opinion. This reflects the inroad made by the pessimistic view of life which unconsciously disturbed the balance in favour of asceticism. But when Buddhism established its order of monks, accepting even young men, there was a reaction in the Hindu tradition which first emphasized the sequence as obligatory and later exalted the householder. Apastamba, after examining all the views, says that, although some ascetics may gain heaven though their austerities, still this is no reason to place one order above the other.<sup>25</sup> Manu defends the status of the householder. "As all living creatures subsist by receiving from air, even so the members of all orders subsist by receiving support from the householder . . . .<sup>26</sup> Because men of the three other orders are daily supported by the householder with gifts and food, the order of the householder is the most excellent order<sup>27</sup> . . . . In accordance with the precepts of the Vedas and of the Smṛiti, the householder is declared to be superior to all of them. For he supports the other three."<sup>28</sup> He frowns upon any tendency to skip this phase in favour of a premature withdrawal from social responsibility. "The man who seeks final liberation without having studied the Vedas, without having begotten sons, and without having performed sacrifices, sinks downward."<sup>29</sup> Manu is convinced that the householder confronts the most exacting discipline. He has to shoulder responsibility and work hard, while always placing the social interest above his own. He must earn his livelihood by honourable means, by following irreproachable occupations. He must be ever ready to share whatever he earns with people in the other three disciplines. Woe to him if any one who begs food from him goes away disappointed. He should not hoard wealth. He should not allow it to harden his soul, to dry up the spring of noble sentiment in the heart. But by charity,



by liberal offerings to the gods, to men, to all sentient beings on earth, he should expand his sympathies, always keeping in mind the ultimate goal of human life, God-realisation.<sup>30</sup> Not only is Manu against any individual skipping this stage, but he does not think it necessary that the householder should retire to the forest even in his old age. He can continue to dwell in his own house, under the protection of his son, practising renunciation even in the thick of life and meditating on that which is salutary for his soul.<sup>31</sup> Baudhayana also combats the high opinion ascetics might hold of themselves. "Ascetics may say, 'Renouncing the ritual obligations taught in the Veda, cut off from both worlds, we attach ourselves to the central sphere (Brahman)'. But the venerable teachers declare that there is one order only, because the others do not beget offspring."<sup>32</sup>

At last, when the round of life is completed, the moment for leaving arrives. The last sacraments invest the departure from the sunlit world with a solemn grace. The dying man is laid on a couch of Darbha grass. Auspicious Mantras for the safe crossing of the great barrier are whispered in his ear.<sup>33</sup> The shade of the departed is supposed to linger for a while on the earth till his son performs the ceremonies which release it. "Depart on your ancient paths." The bones or ashes, after the cremation, are deposited in a sepulchral mound. "Godly people make their sepulchres so as not to be separate from earth. Others make them so as to be separate from earth, either on a stone basin or similar structure."<sup>34</sup> The mound should be set up in a pleasant and peaceful spot. It should have the sun shining on it at midday. There should be woods, gardens or expanses of water to the west or north.<sup>35</sup> There the individual, having fulfilled his destiny, becomes a memory lingering in a hallowed landscape.

Social life evolves without friction when social conduct is streamlined into smooth rhythms. For this, patterns of conduct have to be built into the individual so that they become as automatic and unconscious as reflex behaviour. Moral conduct prescribed by religion has a great authority behind it and thus becomes a powerful agency of social control. But there is always the danger that conduct will become external routine and the inwardness will be lost. The moral literature of India is ever on guard against this danger. Vasishta gives this great exhortation.



"Practise Dharma (righteousness) and not Adharma. Speak the truth and not untruth. Look far ahead, not near. Look at what is highest, not at what is not highest."<sup>36</sup> He adds that avoiding egoism, pride, jealousy and anger is the Dharma of all Asramas alike.<sup>37</sup> In the last analysis, right conduct is a self-attestation, and self-dictated. "Assiduously do that which gives satisfaction to the inner self."<sup>38</sup> This inner self is Brahman who is the inner self of all beings. Therefore, the other is not distinct from oneself. "One who desires happiness should look upon another just as he looks upon himself. Happiness and misery affect one's self and others in the same way."<sup>39</sup>

Ethical speculations elaborated a great doctrine of the four goals or ends of human existence. They are Dharma (right conduct), Artha (economic interests), Kama (satisfaction of libidinal, emotive and aesthetic impulses) and Moksha (salvation or ultimate liberation). It is very important to realise that these are not independent values, but an integrated hierarchy of values. We have to distinguish in them ultimate ends and proximate values. Moksha or liberation is the ultimate end. But its seeking accommodates the other values also. "One must not observe the ordained duties with a worldly end in view . . . . But as when a mango is planted to bear fruit, shade and fragrance also result concomitantly, even so the ordained duty that is performed is attended by material gains."<sup>40</sup> Thus, liberation is the ultimate end, Dharma is the means to it and material prosperity and emotional satisfaction are concomitant results. Once this great perspective is established, the satisfaction of legitimate impulses is given the most liberal recognition. For instance, Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra*, or Treatise on Erotics, is scientific in its thoroughness and lack of inhibitions. It raises sex to a science and an art. But the author never forgets the more inclusive horizon. He definitively states that Dharma is the highest and Kama the lowest of the goals of man.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, even Kautilya, the greatest devotee of economic power, is constrained to concede that whenever there is any conflict between any secular consideration and Dharma, the king should decide the issue by relying on the latter.<sup>42</sup> This perspective made possible a full-blooded living, piloted life from all repressions stemming from unbalanced ascetic attitudes and yet guaranteed that the broad course of life was always flowing



towards the ultimate goal. "One should not allow the morning, midday and evening to remain fruitless so far as Dharma, Artha and Kama are concerned. But among the three, one should attach the paramount importance to Dharma."<sup>43</sup> Seeking wealth and libidinal satisfactions was legitimate. But there was a moral way to their satisfaction. The significant pattern of life was destroyed only when they became the sole and ultimate ends, instead of remaining important but proximate values. *immediates*

Moral prescriptions are mainly required for regulating the social seeking of proximate values, for it is here that competitive tendencies can emerge as a serious threat to social harmony. They are also necessary to stabilise right conduct as social habit. But habit tends to become unconscious and may even become an orthodoxy where outward behaviour is insisted upon while the inner intention is forgotten. Again and again, the moral treatises call attention to this danger. Gautama, while speaking of the necessity for a person to be sanctified by the sacraments, takes care to point out that the mere formal performance of these rites would be of no efficacy in securing the ultimate goal of human life, unless they have developed in him the great qualities of inner self, compassion for all creatures, forbearance, freedom from envy, purity of mind, body and speech, freedom from over-exertion due to unworthy ambitions, auspicious and joyous acceptance of ordained duty, self-respect which will prevent the individual demeaning himself before others and contentment, free from the desire for the possessions of others. After enumerating these eight great qualities, Gautama declares: "He who is sanctified with the forty sacraments, but whose soul is destitute of these good qualities, will not be united with Brahman."<sup>44</sup>

The same caution is extended in the case of pilgrimages. In ancient India, pilgrimages grew up as a salutary feature of popular religion. It enabled men and women to obtain a holiday from the cares of life in localities of solemn beauty or gracious tranquillity and to meet saintly people. It also helped in building up national unity, since men from all parts of India met at these places. Forests, valleys of mountains and rivers flowing from the snows of hills to the salty sea were extolled as sacred by the Rig Veda.<sup>45</sup> The tendency towards orthodox literalism is countered by suggesting that the sanctity lies in the attitude of the mind and



that every place can purify if one is pure. The Padma Purana says that all rivers, whether flowing through a valley or a forest are holy: a place where a chaste housewife dwells, or where one's teacher stands, or where a noble father and a worthy son dwell are all holy.<sup>46</sup> The caution is given that pilgrimages cannot be made an excuse for a flight from obligations. "That person who abandons his proper duties and resorts to holy places does not reap the fruits of pilgrimage in this world or the next."<sup>47</sup> The physical act of ablution has no efficacy. "Fish are born and die in holy waters, but they do not go to heaven."<sup>48</sup> A pure mind is what is required. The man with an impure mind can bathe in all the holy waters on earth, but will still remain impure. It is in the clarification of the concept of the pure mind that the inwardness of these ceremonies is brought out. "Charity, sacrifices, austerity, cleanliness, frequenting sacred places, learning—all these are no purifying ablutions, if the mind is not pure."<sup>49</sup> This shows that even virtue fails to purify if it is merely an outward act without an inward resonance. In the Maha Bharata, Tuladhara tells Jajali that one's soul is the sacred pool and advises him not to go wandering about all over the country in search of holy waters.<sup>50</sup> In the Vamana Purana, this beautiful image is expanded. The soul is a great river full of the waters of self-discipline, speeding with the momentum of truth, breaking into waves of compassion for all beings. It is the holiest of waters. How can it be purified by immersion in the waters of the earth?<sup>51</sup>

## II. Sublimation of Law as Love

If the ethical lore of Hinduism managed to integrate ultimate and proximate values, we must not forget that the other great religions that emerged, Buddhism and Jainism, also evolved a similarly integrated world-vision. Buddhist doctrine, in the initial stage, was stained with the pessimism that we found in certain currents of Upanishadic thought also, as for instance in the Maitrayana Upanishad. The four basic doctrines were these: all life is inevitably sorrowful; sorrow is due to craving; it can only be stopped by the stopping of craving; this can only be done by the course of carefully disciplined and moral conduct, culminating in the life of concentration and meditation, led by the Buddhist monk.



The belief in rebirth is automatically accepted. The pessimistic mood also leads to the unconscious assumption that the cycle of births is a recurring torment. The ethical idea of the first phase, Hinayana, is the Arhat, the austere type who refuses to compromise with the world and whose release from the cycle of births is the extinction of personality or Nirvana. But a profound mutation takes place with the emergence of Mahayana. The ethical ideal now becomes the Bodhisattva, the concept of Nirvana is redefined in positive terms and life is accepted as an opportunity for a different kind of liberation of the spirit which comes from the joyous acceptance of enriching bondages with humanity. We should also recall that while the Hinayana doctrine took shape in Pali texts, the Mahayana doctrine was expounded mostly in Sanskrit, which is yet another justification for noticing it in a history of Sanskrit literature.

Let us begin with a brief glimpse of the life of the founder of Buddhism, to appreciate the fact that his own ideals were those of world-acceptance and not a flight from the obligations of living.

The flower, especially the lotus, has been dear to the spirit of the Buddha and there is a profound symbolism latent here. Springing from the dark mud beneath the water, the lotus stalk reaches upward through the gloom towards the light and bursts into the glory of the flower. Umbilical to the earth, the flower will lose its lustre and become one with the mud from which it emerged. But, for a few hours, it has been an immaculate presence and the value it incarnated knows no decay, because it does not belong to the order of things that decay.

Flowers are radiantly recurring motifs in the narrative of Siddhartha's life. Queen Maya had fallen asleep after celebrating the festival of the moon with an abundance of flowers. In her dream, the lord came to her in the form of a white elephant, holding a white lotus in his trunk. She was delivered of the flower of the human race, while reaching for a flowering spray of a Sal tree in the Lumbini grove, which at that time, the Jataka narrative tells us, was one mass of flowers from the roots to the tips of the branches. Flowers, again, were the mute witnesses of the tragedy of parting, for when Siddhartha left his family, his wife, Yashodhara, was sleeping on a bed strewn with jasmine and other flowers. When he returned to the fold of men, after years of



anguished seeking, flowers assisted at his ministry too, for he always chose gardens, woods and flowering mango groves for his discourses. And when he lay down at last to rest, the sandal trees were in bloom, the scriptures tell us, though it was not the flowering season, and they shed their blossoms on him, washing away life gently in a soft, fragrant rain of petals. The most memorable representation of the Buddha at Ajanta is the Padma Pani, a figure of Apollonian grace holding a lotus.

The luminous sanity of the Buddha enabled Buddhist art from the beginning to steer clear of that misgiving over feminine beauty, which draped the human form with so jealous a rigour in Christian medieval art, till the winds of spring in the Renaissance began to take daring liberties with those flowing garments. Yashodhara, the deserted princess who was loyal to memories during the long years of parting, was in her own way, a figure nearly as great as Siddhartha. King Suddhodhana, the aged father of Siddhartha, told him when the prince returned after many years as mendicant. "My daughter, when she learnt that you were wearing yellow robes, put on yellow robes. When she heard of your having only one meal a day, herself took only one meal." Though the Buddha was reluctant at first to admit women into orders, his foster mother persuaded him to do so.

Buddha prescribed celibacy only for the monks. He never rejected the profoundly humanising influence of the marital bond and only warned the laity to avoid sensuality. He had also known the strength of this great emotional bond. Describing the scene of the renunciation, the scriptures tell us that he wanted to take his young son Rahula with him, but could not bring himself to do it because the mother's hand lay protectingly over the child. "If I move aside the queen's hand and take my son, she will awake and this will be an obstacle to my going. When I have become a Buddha, I will come back to see him." After many years of inward storm, when he won his reconciliation with life, he rediscovered the depth of humanity in that protecting gesture of the mother's hand even in sleep. And so he said: "As a mother protects her only son, so let everyone cultivate a boundless compassion towards all that has life." He also realised the grievous hurt to parents when the children were taken away from them. When the princes, Rahula and Nanda, joined the order, the



aged Suddhodhana asked a boon of the Buddha. "When the Lord abandoned the world, it was no small pain to me; so when Nanda went and even more so with Rahula. The love of a son cuts through the skin, the flesh, the marrow. Grant, Lord, that thy noble disciples may not confer the ordination on a son without the permission of his father and mother." Quick to note the hurt he had caused, Buddha consented.

Spenser in the *Faerie Queene* conceived Mammon as a fat, ugly, cruel monster. And truly he who is eager to acquire the Midas touch arrests the pulse of life and dries up the fountains of the spirit in everything he comes into contact with. But should the war between the haves and have-nots be perennial and inevitable in society? Cannot wealth acquire a socialised conscience? In early Buddhist sculpture, we see rich patrons making gifts to the order and we read in the scriptures of some of them donating lands where famous monasteries grow up. The scriptures describe the Buddha accepting such a gift and teaching the Law of Merit in these words. "These are choice gifts; therefore, ye wise, having your own best weal in mind, raise edifices to lodge the holy brethren of mankind. So shall you be purged of every stain and learn to love goodness and truth." One of the great institutions, which grew up by such patronage, was the Nalanda University, where four thousand students got food, clothes, accommodation and medical services free for pursuing their studies.

This profile of the founder of the faith was necessary to show that the ascetic world-denial of Hinayana was not a sufficiently profound interpretation of the teachings of the Buddha. His integration was not different from that of the Vedas, Upanishads and the Dharma Sastras. If the ultimate values were always kept in mind, the tenor of life could be transformed to yield proximate values which were fully legitimate. The early asceticism now softens to a healthy moral alertness. "When the egocentric desires that are in the heart cease, then at once the mortal becomes immortal and obtains here (in this world) Brahman", the Upanishads had affirmed.<sup>52</sup> Buddhism now enunciates the principles of moral life which can thus transform existence into a journey towards a clear goal. These six principles are generosity; moral, disciplined conduct; patience or forbearance; fortitude or moral courage; meditation, and crowning all, wisdom. Buddha also



recovers the old vision of the world founded on the bed-rock of Dharma or Law. The basic element of the universe, the world-stuff, was known as Dharma-Dhatu or the "Raw Material of the Law." The mystical body of the Buddha, which was roughly equivalent to the World-Soul of Hinduism and the Logos of Neo-Platonism, was called the Dharma-Body. The Law is even prior to the heavenly Buddhas, the divine prototypes that exist even before their earthly incarnation. "The blessed Buddhas, of virtues endless and limitless, are born of the Law of Righteousness. They dwell in the Law, are fashioned by the Law. They have the Law as their master, the Law as their light, the Law as their field of action, the Law as their refuge. They are protected by the Law . . . and all the joys in this world and the next are born of the Law and produced of the Law."<sup>53</sup>

The highest virtue was wisdom. Hinayana felt that wisdom lay in seeking salvation. Mahayana agreed with this but felt that the ideal of the Arhat, who only sought his personal salvation, was not the product of the highest wisdom. According to Mahayana, the objective of the complete extinction of personality in Nirvana was fundamentally selfish and trivial. The truly perfected being is not the Arhat but the Bodhisattva who, even after winning release from the cycle of births, was willing to be born again and again so that he could come to the help of suffering humanity. The highest self-realisation was therefore the acceptance of human and humanising bondage. This new doctrine is stated with exultant confidence. "Those who are afraid of sorrow which arises from the round of birth and death seek Nirvana. They do not realise that between the cycle of birth and death and Nirvana there is really no difference at all. They see Nirvana as the absence of all becoming, and the cessation of all contact of sense-organ and sense-object, and they will not understand that it is only the inner realisation of the store of impression."<sup>54</sup> Santi Deva (seventh century) puts it with even greater force. "Those who seek Nirvana are to be laughed at, for the man in the midst of birth-and-death is also seeking Nirvana."<sup>55</sup>

If the ideal of the Arhat implied a self-attestation, the rejection of the lower impulses and the disciplining of the moral life, the ideal of the Bodhisattva implies a higher and more poetic self-attestation. It is higher because it shifts the accent from personal



salvation to the salvation of all beings. It is more poetic because it kindles the emotional life to a generous glow. "The Bodhisattva develops the consciousness of joy in his relations with all beings and he develops a contemplative spirit filled with joy in all things."<sup>56</sup> The prescribed disciplines and virtues are no longer the necessary but exacting and difficult aid to self-liberation. On the other hand, it is the joyous life-acceptance of the self that transmutes these chill virtues into rich, poetic sentiments. "The virtue of generosity is not my helper. I am the helper of generosity. Nor do the virtues of morality, patience, courage, meditation and wisdom help me. It is I who help them."<sup>57</sup> The great truth that even virtues become dead and uninspiring the moment they are felt to be impositions, even if self-impositions, is glimpsed here with luminous insight. The tidal flow of the heart's purer emotions should be in every action, if it is to be a warm self-affirmation instead of a dead habit. It is clear that the personality of Siddhartha has been able to achieve a profound humanisation of doctrine to a far greater extent than what has been achieved in any of the Dharma Sastra texts though they also glimpse the highest truth.

The teacher, thus, becomes the friend. The basic traits of the Bodhisattva are Maha Maitri, abounding love, and Maha Karuna, great compassion. Maitri is that love for all beings which a mother feels towards her only son. And the Maitri that prompts a Bodhisattva to offer his body and life and all sources of good to all living beings without any thought of recompense is Maha Maitri. The eagerness to work for the deliverance of all sentient beings, fallen into the troubled sea of worldly existence, is called Karuna. And that Karuna which prompts the Bodhisattva to desire enlightenment not for himself but for others is Maha Karuna.

The Mahayana texts soar like exultant songs when they depict this ideal. "A firefly does not imagine that its glow will light up all the land and so the disciples of the Pratyeka Buddhas (seekers of individual salvation) do not think that they should lead all beings to salvation after they have gained enlightenment for themselves. But the disc of the sun, when it has risen, lights up all the land. Similarly, the Bodhisattva, when he has gained full enlightenment, brings countless beings to salvation."<sup>58</sup> In what follows, the Bodhisattva is supposed to be the speaker. "Nirvana



lies in the surrender of all things and my mind is inclined to do so. Therefore, if I must surrender all, it is better to give it to all beings. I yield myself to them . . . . May I be a lamp to those who want it, a bed for those who require it, a servant of all. May I have the power to dispose myself in various ways, so that all living beings may live upon me until they are liberated.”<sup>59</sup> Here the Bodhisattva speaks in the lyrical eloquence of Santi Deva. “Assuredly I must bear the burden of all beings, for I have resolved to save them all. For all beings are caught in the net of craving, encompassed by ignorance, shut in a cage of pain. I work to establish the kingdom of perfect wisdom for all beings. I care not at all for my deliverance. I must save all beings from the torrent of rebirth with the raft of my mind. I must pull them back from the great precipice. I must free them from all misfortune. I must so bring to fruition the root of goodness that all beings find the utmost joy, unheard of joy.”<sup>60</sup>

Thus the concept of the saviour who is the suffering servant of humanity develops in Mahayana Buddhism with astonishing affinities to the teachings of Isaiah in the Old and of Jesus in the New Testaments. “His divine eye sees innumerable beings and he is filled with great distress at what he sees, for many bear the burden of past misdeeds which will be punished. So he pours out his love and compassion upon all those beings and attends to them, saying, ‘I shall become the saviour of all beings and set them free from their suffering.’”<sup>61</sup> The Bodhisattva takes over the pain and stain of the world. “All that mass of pain and consequences of evil deed I take in my own body. I take upon myself the burden of sorrow.”<sup>62</sup> The entire humanity, the rich and the poor, the high caste and the low caste, kindred and alien, win this benediction. “Go into all lands and preach this gospel. Tell them that the poor and the lowly, the rich and the high, are all one, and that all castes unite in this religion like rivers in the sea.” Far more significant is the fact that even the violent, hostile sinner is not alienated from the abounding compassion of the Bodhisattva. “Just as the rising sun is not stopped by all the dust rising from the continents of the earth or by wreaths of smoke or by rugged mountains, so the Bodhisattva is not deterred from bringing to fruition the root of good by the malice of others”<sup>63</sup> . . . . May those who revile me, afflict me, beat me, cut me in



pieces with their swords, or take my life—may they all obtain the joy of complete enlightenment.”<sup>64</sup> A wealth of legend grows up, narrating the many incarnations of the Bodhisattva where he repeatedly suffered martyrdom but never ceased to love even his tormentors.

Though we may miss the profound human warmth of the Buddha in Jainism, this faith, like the Hindu Dharma Sastra, evolves towards a world-affirmation as against a retreat from the obligations of living. Vardhamana Mahavira, who stabilised the religion, was a contemporary of Siddhartha and, like him, was a prince turned mendicant. But Jain tradition assumes a long line of preceptors, called Tirthankaras (ford-makers over the torrent of existence) of whom Mahavira is the twenty-fourth and the last. The twenty-third teacher, Parsvanatha, is ascribed by tradition to the eighth century B.C. and may have been a historical figure. But his predecessors are shadowy figures as far as historicity is concerned. However, Jainism traces itself back to the Vedas, to the sage Rishabha who is mentioned in the Rig Veda.

We saw earlier that the antithetical tendencies towards the affirmation of religion as an inward quest and its stabilisation as a sacerdotal creed existed from very early times. In the Satapatha Brahmana, the priests of the Kuru Panchala country are advised not to travel in the eastern lands of Kashi, Kosala, Videha and Magadha, because the people there had lost their purity and were preaching a new doctrine according to which the non-performance of animal sacrifices was the true Dharma. The Vajasa-neyi Samhita goes further and alleges that the easterners had not only lost the Vedic faith in animal sacrifices and challenged the supremacy of the priests, but had also undergone a degeneration even in their language. We can now see why the eastern lands, where orthodoxy could not maintain its hold, cradled the reformation represented by Buddhism and Jainism and why, in the initial phase, they used the spoken dialects, rather than Sanskrit, for their preaching.

Jainism held out a clear warning against ignorant superstition, which it categorised as of three kinds. The first superstitious tradition attached sanctifying power to pilgrimages, bathing in sacred rivers and similar observances. The second inculcated a belief in all sorts of village and tribal deities and provoked



attempts to propitiate them. Devotion to false ascetics who were only seeking self-aggrandizement was the third category. Jainism emphasized the doctrine of the self-determining efficacy of individual effort and the responsibility implied in that outlook. Man should attempt to be indifferent to pleasure and pain. True freedom consists in an independence of all outer things. "That Jiva (Soul) which through desire for outer things, experiences pleasurable or painful states, loses his hold on self and gets bewildered, and led by outer things. He becomes determined by the other."<sup>65</sup> That Jiva alone, which, being free from bondage to others and from alien thoughts, through its own intrinsic nature of perception and understanding perceives its own eternal nature, can be said to have conduct that is absolutely self-determined. "Man, thou art thine own friend. Why seekest thou a friend beyond thyself?"<sup>66</sup> Self-determination did not mean self-indulgence which always implied bondage to some trivial pleasure which the world might yield. It necessarily implied self-discipline. The five cardinal virtues which could make self-determination a reality were non-violence, which was not mere negative abstention, but positive kindness to all creation; love of truth; honourable conduct; purity of thought, word and deed; renunciation of worldly obsessions.

The three principles—Ratnatraya or Three Jewels—of salvation are right faith, right knowledge and right conduct, corresponding to the Ways of Love (Bhakti), Knowledge (Jnana) and Work (Karma) of Hindu doctrine. But, while the three faiths are equally efficacious alternatives in Hindu doctrine, Jainism insists on an integrated approach with a three-fold discipline. Using the analogy of bodily health for spiritual health, in order to get cured of any ailment, one must have full faith in the doctor and the medicine, full knowledge of when and how to take the medicine and further, should actually take the medicine and practise the dietary and other regulations that go with it. The distinctions of creed do not matter provided this doctrine is followed. "No matter whether he is a Svetambara Jain or Digambara Jain, a Buddhist or a follower of any other creed, one who has realized the self-sameness of the soul, that is, one who looks on all creatures as his own self, attains liberation."<sup>67</sup>

Hindu moral treatises, Jain doctrine and Buddhism all glimpse



the essential unity of being which makes all creation kindred. The most moving expression of this vision is in Mahayana Buddhism. But the Vedas had caught this vision much earlier. "May all beings see me with the eyes of a friend! May I see all beings with the eyes of a friend!"<sup>68</sup> And later, when the Vaishnavite movement achieved a poetic transformation of moral life, the necessity of all commandments dissolved away because the love of humanity had spontaneously welled up and become a great river. Ranti Deva supplicates fervently in the Bhagavata Purana: "I do not want the highest state from God, nor do I want the accession of miraculous powers, nor liberation from rebirth. I want to undergo the sufferings of all beings, being in them, so that they may become free from all desires."<sup>69</sup> Dhruva, when asked by God to choose a boon, said: "I pray for the well-being of the universe. I want no boon." Srikantha wrote: "The worship of Siva consists in being of service to all."<sup>70</sup>

Ethical commandments seek to achieve harmony by making social conduct as smooth and automatic as habit. But behind these commands are an intuitive vision of the unity of being and an emotional sensitiveness that can receive hurt when others are hurt. Social conduct is of great value to society even if it rests on the mechanism of habit. But the mission of ethics is complete only when its dictates become superfluous in a context where the heart throbs in unison with the pulse of the world due to the welling up of love rather than the force of a command.

### *III. The Political Order*

But the paradox of man is that the force of a command is necessary even for teaching him to love his kind and thus ultimately manage without authoritarian restraint.

This is because the degree of socialisation always remains unequal as between individuals and therefore it is not possible to found social order on the good sense of individuals alone, when large groups are concerned. Theory and practice thus have to move in the direction of establishing a locus of authority within the social mass. The task that confronts thought here is to legitimise force as a social instrument, guard against the real dangers of its abuse and integrate this political realism with moral and



spiritual idealism.

The Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad manages this difficult task with exceptional brilliance. In its account of creation, Brahman is described as successively creating the prototypes of the various social orders, the Kshatriyas (the military-political ruling class), the Vaisyas (agriculturists and industrialists) and the Sudras (workers). But the Upanishad proceeds to say that Brahman did not feel strong enough, that is, he was not reassured that social stability was guaranteed. "So he further created the most excellent Dharma (Law). Law is the Kshatra of the Kshatra (sanction and quintessence of political authority). Therefore, there is nothing higher than Law. Thenceforth even a weak man rules a stronger with the help of Law as with the help of a king. Law is Truth. If a man declares what is true, they say he declares the Law; and if he declares the Law, they say he declares what is true. Thus both are the same."<sup>71</sup> The doctrinal implications of this statement are very important. First of all, Law is divine in origin, like society and the division of labour in society. Further, it represents the highest positive authority. It overrides in particular the civil authority represented by the Kshatriya ruler. Finally, positive law is synonymous with morality or Dharma.<sup>72</sup>

Let us retrace our steps a little and try to understand why it was felt that social solidarity was insecure without positive law. The Law of the Fishes (Matsya Nyaya) is often referred to in Indian political treatises. Raghu Natha<sup>73</sup> of the fifteenth century dwells at considerable length on it, but it goes back to the ancient days. The law of the fishes is the law of the monsters or anti-social types. In the state of nature, the bigger fish devour the smaller, the strong oppress the weak. The psychology of men in the state of nature is given a detailed analysis by Bhishma in his great discourse on statecraft in the Maha Bharata.<sup>74</sup> There is uninhibited play of ego-centred drives which obscure the intellect and destroy the sense of justice. The strong begins to devour the weak like big fish the small. Manu<sup>75</sup> also uses the metaphor and, according to the Matsya Purana, in the absence of the restraint of positive law, "the child, the old, the sick, the ascetic, the priest, the woman and the widow would be preyed upon according to the logic of the fish."<sup>76</sup>

While the restraint of positive law is thus justified for saving



society from anarchy, it is again and again emphasized that legalised force should be used as a means and not as an end, as an instrument of statecraft, the ultimate objective of which is the same as the ideal held up by religion, philosophy and the ethical treatises. Danda Niti means the administration of the coercive power of the state. Many writers take care to stress repeatedly that this administration should be directed towards certain ideals. Thus, Kamandaka insists that the objectives should be the prevention of a reversion to the logic of the fishes and also the more positive ideal of making the people settle down in moral conduct.<sup>77</sup> Sukra<sup>78</sup> clarifies this further. It is through fear of punishment that people refrain from committing aggression and ultimately become virtuous. Manu<sup>79</sup> expressly states that Dharma or morality is created by the state, or by its sanction, Danda, positive, legalised use of force. Is not Danda, legal use of force, "divine, God's own son, the protector of all beings, and as powerful as law itself?", he asks.

In a daring reach of thought, Bhishma in the Maha Bharata proceeds to derive the four ages of the world, a metaphor for patterns of social organisation which realise social justice in differing degrees, from the full or partial alignment of the use of coercive authority by the state with the ideal of transforming the social order into a moral order. "The quality of the legal system determines the age." This insight probably transcends that of Marx, for Marx was committed to the economic determinism of history and he was driven to the position that the legal structure of society would always reflect the interests of the ruling groups. Even in the ultimate triumph of the socialist revolution, this position would not be changed, for the legal structure then would align itself with the interests of the working classes. Bhishma notes the danger that positive law may be used for promoting sectional interests, but he does not accept this as an inevitable determinism. Law can be used for securing justice for all classes and this is the prescribed ideal.

One of the forms of political order that arose in ancient India, and perhaps the most usual, was kingship. So far, Indian theory is in agreement with the early European conception, as instanced, for example, by the speculation of Protagoras on the origin of the state after primeval chaos.<sup>80</sup> But some currents of subsequent



political thought in Europe moved in the direction of favouring absolutism. The bible of absolutism is Hobbes' *Leviathan*. Harassed by the anarchy of the state of nature, individuals entered into a contract by which they transferred authority to a ruler. Hobbes insists that this transfer is irrevocable. But in India, as Banerjee<sup>81</sup> and Bhandarkar<sup>82</sup> have shown, political theory has always insisted that the transfer is freely revocable by the people. This attitude has conditioned the doctrine of kingship at every stage.

According to a Buddhist text like the Digha Nikaya,<sup>83</sup> the origin of kingship was in the election and commission by the people. The ruler was called Great Elect, because he was chosen by a great multitude of men, and Rajan (harmoniser) because he pleased every group by his administration of justice. According to the Maha Bharata, the people commissioned Manu to be their king, promising him for the treasury one-tenth of their grain and one-fiftieth of their cattle.<sup>84</sup> The principles of election and of what may be called the fee-theory of taxation find repeated mention in political treatises and history. The researches of Zimmer,<sup>85</sup> Weber,<sup>86</sup> Bloomfield<sup>87</sup> and Macdonell<sup>88</sup> have shown that there is definite evidence that kings were frequently elected by the people. Epigraphical evidence shows that, in the second century, Rudradaman was elected to kingship by "all orders of the people."<sup>89</sup> In the seventh century, Harsha came to the throne through election by ministers and magistrates and the approval of the people was "shown in their songs."<sup>90</sup> During the middle of the eighth century a commoner was elected king, in the person of Gopala, who eventually became the founder of the Pala empire of Bengal.<sup>91</sup>

The coronation oath which the king had to undertake made him subordinate to law. "I shall always regard the country (Bhuma) as the highest God (Brahma). And whatever is to be prescribed as law on the basis of statecraft I shall follow without hesitation, never my own inclination."<sup>92</sup> The sage Utathya says in the very opening lines of his address in the Maha Bharata that the king exists for the sake of righteousness and not for self-gratification. To a king who seems to have claimed some degree of right to authoritarian privilege since the whole executive authority concentrated upon him, Arya Deva replied with



angry impatience, "What superciliousness is thine, O king, thou who art a mere servant of the multitude and who receivest the sixth part of the produce as thine wages?"<sup>93</sup> The king is thus a wage-earning executive. Baudhayana also repeats this view. "Let the king protect the subjects, receiving as his pay a sixth part of the produce."<sup>94</sup> The Maha Bharata also states that the taxes levied by the king are his wages<sup>95</sup>—a statement which once again emphasises the idea that the king is an official, a servant of the people.

Many of the ethical treatises lay down exhaustive lists of the king's duties which make one sympathise with the attitude of Manu, in the story about the origin of kingship in the Maha Bharata, who at first refused to take up the thankless responsibility. Apastamba asserted that if the king did not punish the guilty, he incurred sin.<sup>96</sup> Yajnavalkya claims that the king takes half of whatever sins are committed by the unprotected subjects, since he levies taxes.<sup>97</sup> The tougher among the rulers may have thought lightly of amassing such sins since they merely implied a doubtful and deferred punishment in after-life. But they had to take seriously the provisions for their control and punishment in this world. Gautama<sup>98</sup> prescribes a penance for the king who neglects to inflict punishment. Vasishta<sup>99</sup> imposes a penance for him in the event of unjust decision of suits. Because he has been given authority as a trust, the king comes in for enhanced punishment when he betrays the trust. Manu declares it as a settled rule that "where a common man would be fined one unit of money, the king shall be fined one thousand."<sup>100</sup> The Maha Bharata declares in a forthright manner: "The king who does not protect his subjects is a thief among kings."<sup>101</sup> The people have the right to throw him out. Sukra stands up unequivocally for this right. If the king becomes unrighteous, he should be repudiated as the enemy of the kingdom. In his place, the chief priest should instal a virtuous prince of his family for the protection of the kingdom after obtaining the approval of the subjects.<sup>102</sup> In extreme crises, tyrannicide is a just solution. In the Maha Bharata, the sage Vama Deva asserts that the unjust king who employs sinful and wicked ministers should be slain by the people.<sup>103</sup> Bhishma also states: "The king who tells his people that he is their protector but does not actually protect



them should be slain by his united subjects like a mad dog afflicted with rabies."<sup>104</sup> Manu is also in agreement with this.<sup>105</sup>

But we should not assume that the gap between theory and practice was narrower in India than in other countries. Expulsion of the king, re-election and regicide, though fully justified by theory, could have been effectively practised only in exceptional instances. Authority has the tendency, and knows all the stratagems, to perpetuate itself. History also sometimes favoured the rise of absolutisms, of strong, centralised monarchical and imperial systems and even made them necessary and salutary, if only as a transitional phase. The collapse of Indian states before Alexander brought home the necessity for a strong, centralised state and enabled Chandra Gupta Maurya to establish a strong empire. Tradition claims that Kautilya, the author of the *Artha Sastra*<sup>106</sup> or *Science of Polity*, was the minister of Chandra Gupta. Authorities like Jolly,<sup>107</sup> Keith<sup>108</sup> and Winternitz<sup>109</sup> have found it difficult to accept the traditional date, about 300 B.C., for the work and bring it forward to about 300 A.D. Most of their arguments have been met by Kane.<sup>110</sup> Whatever the date of the work, there is no ambiguity about its content. It is the bible of absolutism, strong imperial systems and expansionism.

Kautilya, in his opening chapter, reviews the evolution of political theory and this reflects the expanding horizons of the state as a collective organisation. He mentions four schools. The most primitive of these is that of Sukracharya, who teaches that the king's only duty is coercion, condign punishment, assassination and massacre. The idea of government in all primitive societies is mere protection of person and property and the most violent form of coercion is used. The next school, attributed to Brihaspati, adds agriculture, pasture and commerce to mere coercion for preserving order. The state here begins to play a more positive role, encouraging economic and productive activities. The next school, attributed to the Manavas, adds the teachings of the three Vedas. Here, the state takes interest in education of a religious and social character. The last school, represented by Kautilya, adds philosophy, indicating secular education of all sorts.

If the arena of state action has expanded, Kautilya at least is not prepared to minimise to any extent the key role of coercion.



In his concluding chapter he writes: "Artha is the means of subsistence of men. It is, in other words, the earth which is filled with men. Artha Sastra is the science which deals with the mode of acquisition and protection of that earth." The reference to acquisition suggests the expansionist outlook of Kautilya and the means for it, force, is also the means for protecting the civic order. If the use of coercion is tempered, it is not due to moral idealism, which, Kautilya feels, can be rather premature, but due to the insight of statesmanship. Rejecting the suggestion that the king should be ever ready to strike, Kautilya says: "He who inflicts severe punishment becomes oppressive to all creatures. He who inflicts mild punishment is overpowered. He who inflicts just punishment is respected."<sup>11</sup> Kautilya prefers the subtler and less conspicuous weapon of espionage and secret police. The secret agents form a vast network and are given wide powers. Kautilya has no mercy for the seditious. They are to be destroyed and since it is difficult to punish them openly, they can be assassinated by the secret service.

Kautilya is after complete concentration of power, but it is very important to realise that he is not seeking personal aggrandisement. An earlier writer, Bharadvaja, had recommended that the minister should always seek the highest power for himself. "When the king is on his death-bed, the minister should set up the princes and chiefs against one another and then have them murdered by rousing the subjects against them. Or by assassinating them, he should seize the reigns of government." Kautilya seeks centralisation of power because he believes that social stability cannot be achieved without it, not because he is intoxicated with the idea of power. Therefore he wants power for the state which, in his eyes, is symbolised by the monarch. He gives careful instructions how to tide over the difficult period between the death of a king and the accession of his successor. All arrangements for the succession are to be finalised before the news of the demise of the ruler is released. Though he was a minister, he has indicated the ways in which the monarch can bring about the downfall of a powerful but hostile minister. Henry VIII used a similar stratagem against Cardinal Wolsey. Kautilya also wants the ruler to practise self-control incessantly and to be well-versed in logical thinking and philosophy. Kautilya was



no power-intoxicated politico. His absolutism became all the more monolithic and thorough because in his own personal life and in the personal life of the monarch he insisted on severe asceticism.

Standards of living could not be improved without increased production and Kautilya quickly shows that he will not tolerate any curtailment of production. He prefers guilds for day-workers and labourers, for it is easier to deal with them if they are organised. The total earnings are to be divided equally among all members of the guild unless its usage dictated otherwise. A person leaving the guild, after the work has commenced, is to be punished with fines. Any person neglecting his proper share of work is to be excused for the first time, but if he persists in his behaviour, he is to be thrown out of the guild. The state should grant labour certain privileges. Thus, a grace of seven days over and above the period agreed upon should be conceded to the guilds for fulfilling their contracts.<sup>112</sup> Extra wages are to be given for work on holidays. The government overseer is to be fined heavily if he delays payment or if he harasses women workers. Kautilya has no patience with a world-renouncing asceticism. Any one renouncing the world without providing for the maintenance of his family and dependents is to be punished. We get a picture of productive enterprise expanding to virgin soil. Kautilya outlines programmes for colonizing vast tracts by establishing villages in them.

✓ Like Bismarck, Kautilya tried to steal the thunder from democratic socialism by showing that an absolute monarchy could also be a welfare state. The cities were to be clean and municipal administration strict. Whoever threw dirt in the street was to be punished with fines. An interesting detail is the solicitude of the state for the inebriate. Police agents in disguise visited taverns and kept a note of the dress, ornaments and money of the customers lying there insensible under the influence of wine. If they lost anything, the shop-keeper had to make good the loss and also pay an additional fine. In the first chapter itself, Kautilya emphasizes the king's duty to provide for orphans, the aged and the sick, destitute pregnant women and their new-born children.

If Kautilya felt that absolutism was justified only if power was used for the welfare of the people, he was also keenly aware of the other dimensions of the situation. A disaffected populace



could be a danger. When the people become impoverished, he says, they become greedy and disaffected and then they might slay their ruler or go over to the enemy's camp. The reference to the enemy brings us to Kautilya's foreign policy. Here the absolutist philosophy naturally evolved into a doctrine of conquest and world domination.

Kautilya, like Sukra much later, starts by asserting that political independence is absolutely necessary for the happiness of a people. "Great misery", says Sukra, "comes of dependence on others. There is no greater happiness than that from self-rule."<sup>113</sup> Under foreign domination, Kautilya says, a country is not treated as one's own land, it is impoverished, its wealth carried off, or it is treated as a commercial article.<sup>114</sup> If now he comes to the conclusion that domination of other countries is necessary for the preservation of the sovereignty of one's own country, it is because he is sceptical of international relations ever being moralised. "All rulers are unfriendly, they are secret enemies to those who are rising, vigorous, virtuous and powerful," said Sukra and summed up his entire outlook in a rhetorical query which carried its own answer. "Are not rulers covetous of territory?"<sup>115</sup> Kautilya also held the same view. Therefore, if a country did not want to be dominated, it had to dominate others. A state of war—either 'cold' or 'hot' war—was the natural relation between states. Kalidas Nag has tried to make out Kautilya as a pacifist because in one passage he says that, when the advantages of peace and war are alike, a king should conclude peace, as there is always loss and risk in war. But as Winternitz<sup>116</sup> has shown, Kautilya opts for peace only when he is not sure of his military strength. For he lays down this maxim. "He who is weaker than the other shall make peace, he who is stronger shall wage war."

In the further clarification of his views, Kautilya brilliantly anticipates the geopolitical theories of a thinker of our own times like Karl Haushofer.<sup>117</sup> The ruler should strive to ensure that he becomes the centre of gravity of a Mandala or geopolitical sphere. This doctrine of the Mandala, which really is the Indian doctrine of the balance of power, is hinted at by Sukra,<sup>118</sup> referred to by Manu<sup>119</sup> and dwelt upon at length by Kamandaka,<sup>120</sup> who was a great admirer of Kautilya. But its greatest exponent is Kautilya.<sup>121</sup> His schematisation of the geopolitical complex is a



little too neat and geometrical, but the essence of the scheme is that the neighbouring country is to be watched both as an immediate source of danger and as the first prey, the neighbour's neighbour could possibly be an ally and so on as we expand from the centre of the geopolitical sphere to the successive peripheral zones. The ruler's ambition should be to be a conqueror who shall undertake the conquest of all this terrain, reducing all the other states to feudal vassalage under him. Such imperial ambitions can be found in the earlier literature also. "Monarchy at its highest", says the Aitareya Brahmana, "should have an empire extending right up to the natural boundaries. It should be territorially all-embracing up to the very ends uninterrupted, and should constitute and establish one state and administration upto the seas."<sup>122</sup> The imperial ambitions of some of the monarchs of probably the sixth century B.C. echo in this work. Thus, one aspirant proclaims, "I want to attain to lordship over all rulers. I want to achieve the conquest of both space and time. I want to be world-ruler and sole monarch of the earth up to the skies."<sup>123</sup>

The imperial drive is an all-out drive. Primary reliance is of course on the army. Manu says: "One should be ever ready with striking power, should always have one's might in evidence and policies well-guarded, as well as be ever on the look-out for the enemy's weak points. One should bring to subjection all those elements that are obstacles to the career of triumph."<sup>124</sup> Before the main attack by the army, Kautilya says, the king must weaken the neighbouring country by the destruction of agricultural produce, of standing crops, of their trade and by causing the people to flee.<sup>125</sup> Political intrigue should be used extensively to weaken the other state. "In order to do away with one's enemies their kith and kin should be employed whenever possible," says Kamandaka.<sup>126</sup>

It is important to realise that Kautilya was solely interested in stability, for realising which the only solution he was prepared to accept was an all-embracing imperial system. He was not interested in cultural subjugation. Though an implacable imperialist, Kautilya is at least free from the irritating cant of European imperialism in its colonial adventures. There is no talk about the secret mission of carrying culture to the benighted. The fact



seems to be that Kautilya believed that the first task was to achieve economic and political stability and that cultural life would then look after itself. Of the four ends of life, he is reticent about ultimate liberation and of the remaining three, economic well-being is the most important, for it is the basic requirement for the other two. "Of the three ends of human life, material gain is, verily, the most important. On material gain depends the realisation of Dharma and Kama."<sup>127</sup> In the matter of culture, he was prepared to give people the freedom which he denied them in politics as too risky for the stability of the state. As for himself, he was quite willing to use cultural traditions also to serve his primary interest. Thus, if funds are low in the treasury, he advocates this technique. The king can have a shrine with an idol erected during the night and the news spread that it had sprung up by itself overnight. From the pilgrimages and offerings he can then derive revenues. This is not a very ethical prescription, but it does reveal a freedom from any obsession regarding one's own culture which softens the impact of conquest on the conquered. Kautilya clearly lays down this procedure. "After having acquired a new territory, the king should adopt the manners and customs, costume, language and style of life of the people. He should follow their faith as regards local deities, festivals, processions and recreations. He should grant a general amnesty and afford help to the helpless, the distressed and the sick. By strict observance of his duties he should outshine the former ruler's virtues by his own virtues. By bestowing rewards, privileges and honours, he should do everything that contributes to the welfare of the people." Kautilya was interested in good government. But he was not prepared to stand any nonsense from the people about self-government. Administration was his responsibility and, if the people behaved, he undertook to do that job with the thoroughness with which he attended to security at home and expansion abroad.

From dreams of world-empire, let us return to the democratic alternatives to the problem of social and world stability which also were formulated and widely practised in India. We have already seen that the obligations laid on kingship made it, in theory at least, a constitutional monarchy. Large areas of social and economic life were realms of self-governing autonomy. Gautama's



authoritative treatise authorises cultivators, traders, herdsmen, moneylenders and artisans to lay down rules for their respective classes and we are further told that the king shall give the legal decision after having learned the state of affairs from those in each who have authority to speak.<sup>128</sup> Manu not only reiterates this but expressly refers to usages of the guilds as having the force of law. Narada explicitly states: "The king must maintain the usages of the guilds and other corporations. Whatever be their laws, their religious duties, the rules regarding their attendance and the particular mode of livelihood prescribed for them, that the king shall approve of."<sup>129</sup> Both Narada and Brishaspati<sup>130</sup> concede that the king has the residuary power to interfere in the working of the corporations, but this is only when they indulge in extremely anti-social activities, arm themselves or indulge in violent mutual conflicts.

The power of the people was a curb on officials. Sukra lays down that the king "should dismiss the officer who is accused by one hundred men."<sup>131</sup> Other authorities suggest that a reference to the king was perhaps not necessary for such action. Yajñavalkya<sup>132</sup> and Mitra Misra<sup>133</sup> are quite explicit on this point. The latter also quotes Katyayana in support of his contention which is that the assembly has the right to remove executive officers and that the help of the king should be invoked only if the assembly, for any reasons, found it difficult to punish such men. The evidence of the Basarh seals suggests that there were powerful guild organisations, with ruling authority, in various cities of India during the Gupta period.<sup>134</sup> An inscription at Gwalior<sup>135</sup> refers to a board of merchants and industrialists administering the city in 877. The village assemblies were looked upon as a recognised primary tribunal of the land. Narada demands the highest sense of responsibility from the judicial assembly. "Either the judicial assembly must not be entered at all, or a fair opinion should be delivered. That man who either stands mute or delivers an opinion contrary to justice is a sinner. Therefore let every member of the jury deliver a fair opinion after having entered the court, discarding bias and aversion."<sup>136</sup> Corporate spirit among villagers was encouraged, even by Kautilya, with whom production was a paramount consideration. He offers generous state support. "Those who, with their united



efforts, construct buildings of any kind beneficial to the whole country shall be shown favourable concessions by the king."<sup>137</sup>

Before the rise of kingship, the early Aryans had two governing bodies, the Sabha or the tribal or village assembly and the Samiti or the larger, general assembly. South Indian inscriptions of the tenth century indicate that the village assembly was often divided into several functional committees, for irrigation, tax collection, general supervision, justice etc. The Sabha has continued to our own days as the Panchayat and a bold experiment in democratic decentralisation, seeking to restore the Panchayats to their old vitality, has been launched by the Indian Republic. The Samiti underwent an evolution which has affinities with the development in England. Just as the great National Council of the English gave rise to the Permanent Council which subsequently dwindled into the Privy Council out of which the king selected his confidential ministers and formed the cabinet, the Vedic Samiti gave place to the Mantri Parishad or Council of Ministers out of which the king selected a few to form a smaller executive. That this smaller executive of ministers was different from the Council of Ministers is borne out by the fact that the king is enjoined, in case of emergency, to call both his ministers as well as this Council.<sup>138</sup> All writers on administration insist that the ministers should be the people's representatives and guardians. They are the sole prop of the state, says Bharadvaja.<sup>139</sup> Arbitrary rule by the king is ruled out by the Matsya Purana,<sup>140</sup> the Agni Purana,<sup>141</sup> and Kamandaka.<sup>142</sup> Sukra, who came later than Kamandaka, places the greatest emphasis on this. He wants a strong council of ministers. "Can there be prosperity in a kingdom if there be ministers whom the king does not fear?" He defines "good ministers" as such persons "whose control the king fears."<sup>143</sup> He goes on to declare in a forthright manner that the king who does not listen to the counsels of ministers is a "thief in the form of a ruler, an exploiter of the peoples' wealth."<sup>144</sup> Expulsion and regicide are now in the offing. Even Kautilya paid a homage, even if it be a lip homage, to the council of ministers. They are to be consulted on all important issues, even the absent members by letters. They should consider all that concerns both the king and his enemy and the king should do whatever the majority of the members suggest.<sup>145</sup>



While such safeguards transformed kingship into constitutional monarchy, there were many states which dispensed with hereditary kingship altogether. Interesting light on these old republics has been shed by the researches of Rhys Davids,<sup>146</sup> Jayaswal,<sup>147</sup> Bhandarkar,<sup>148</sup> Ramaprasad Chand<sup>149</sup> and others. A passage in the Aitareya Brahmana<sup>150</sup> mentions that among the Uttara Kurus and the Uttara Madras, the whole community was consecrated to rulership and their political systems were called Vairajya or kingless states. Other names for the republics were Gana or Janapada. Again, we read in the Buddhist story-cycles that a few merchants from mid-India visited the Deccan and being asked about the form of government in their country, replied. "Some regions are under kings, while others are ruled by Ganas."<sup>151</sup> During the time of Buddha, the Sakyas and the Vajjians were the most important republican clans in eastern India. The latter was a confederacy formed by the union of Videha, originally a monarchy, with Vaisali and six other peoples. The administrative and judicial business of these republics was carried out in public assembly at which young and old alike were present. A single chief was elected as office-holder presiding over the sessions, and if no sessions were sitting, over the state.

There are two important references in the Buddhist scriptures where the Buddha himself is reported as discoursing on the republican pattern. One is in the *Anguttara Nikaya*,<sup>152</sup> the other in the *Maha Parinibbana Suttanta* of the *Digha Nikaya*.<sup>153</sup> In the first, the Buddha explains to a Lichchavi-Vajjian delegation the seven conditions of welfare of republican organisations. The most important among them are concord, holding meetings of the clan regularly, obedience to elders, observance of time-honoured customs and usages. The context of the second utterance was more critical. Ajata Satru, King of Magadha, wanted to annex the Vajjian republics. The Buddha checks up with his disciple whether the republics are carefully preserving the democratic safeguards. "Have you heard, Ananda, that the Vajjians foregather often and frequent the public meetings of the clans?" "Lord, so I have heard," replies Ananda. The Buddha now feels reassured. So long Ananda, as the Vajjians foregather thus often, and participate in the public meetings of their clans, so long may they be expected not to decline but to prosper." It is very clear



that the Buddha himself had strong republican sympathies. For, elsewhere in the same text he claims, "When I was once staying at Vaisali at the Sarandada shrine, I taught the Vajjians these conditions of welfare." The pattern he laid down for his own monastic orders and establishments was essentially democratic.

The republic of the Arattas (Arashtrakas, *i.e.*, the kingless clan) came to the help of Chandra Gupta Maurya against the Greeks who had established themselves in the Indian borderland. But his minister Kautilya had no room for republican enclaves in the expanding empire. The strength of the republics is revealed in the grudging tribute paid by this imperialist. "Sovereignty may belong to a clan. A republic consisting of clans as the political unit is hard to conquer and, being free from the danger of anarchy, enjoys a permanent stability." When Ajata Satru was threatening the Vajjian Confederacy, the Buddha had felt confident that they would not collapse before a straightforward military attack, but he was not so certain about diplomatic intrigue. "The Vajjians cannot be overcome by the King of Magadha, that is, not in battle, without diplomacy or breaking their alliance." Kautilya also realised that the strength of republics or confederations lay in the unity of their members and his plan of attack was to create dissension among them, through secret agents. Bhishma in the *Maha Bharata*<sup>154</sup> also teaches the same lesson with the difference that he is not anxious about overwhelming them but concerned about their vitality. The main requirement for vitality is unity. Other conditions are discipline, attention to counsel, respect for valour and wisdom, just laws and prompt administration of justice, appointment of righteous officials. The greatest danger is party rivalry. Often this may be engineered by outside influences and therefore Bhishma wants the republics to pay special attention to espionage and counter-espionage.

Just as Kautilya's absolutism was balanced by the alternatives of constitutional monarchy and the republican pattern, Indian tradition was able to provide an alternative also to Kautilya's imperial system in the field of international relations. The Dwara Palas in Indian sculpture are essentially the symbols of the power which maintains order. They stand guard in front of shrines. In the shrines of Siva they are most conspicuous, Titanic warrior gods or demons, leaders of the dark hosts of Siva who can be



very swift in their punishment. Even more terrifying are the Lokapalas, guardians of the four quarters of the earth, in Tantric Buddhism. But at Sanchi, one of the earliest Buddhist monuments, the Dwara Pala is a gracious figure. His upraised arm wears no sword, but only a lotus. And in this lotus-bearing guardian of civic peace, it is possible to glimpse the social and political outlook of Buddhism which minimises coercion and emphasizes harmony in the relation between groups within a country and in the relation between countries. We have already seen that Vedic literature was also inspired by such an enlightened outlook. It was Emperor Asoka who was able to realise this ideal as actual state policy.

"His sacred Majesty desires that all animate beings should have security, self-control, peace of mind and joyousness," states the Thirteenth Edict of Asoka. The ideal international relations advocated by Buddhism emerge in the same Edict. "One hundred and fifty thousand persons were thence carried away captive, one hundred thousand were there slain and many times that number perished," runs the Edict while recalling with remorse the Kalinga campaign, Asoka's first and last imperial adventure. "This is a matter of profound sorrow and regret to His Sacred Majesty. This is the chiefest conquest in the opinion of His Sacred Majesty—the conquest by the Law of Piety. And this again has been won by His Sacred Majesty both in his own dominions and in all the neighbouring realms as far as six hundred leagues. The conquest thereby won everywhere is everywhere a conquest full of delight. Delight is found in the conquest made by the Law."

If Asoka's international order did not endure, it is because peace is something which has to be fought for, in the hearts of men, against their own drives centered on the ego, clan or nation. In the third or fourth century A.D. before the full expansion of the Gupta empire when warfare became widespread, Buddhist tradition again uttered a warning and expressed an Utopian hope in the *Sutra of the Excellent Golden Light*.<sup>155</sup> Buddha addresses the four gods guarding the four quarters of the earth. He specifically mentions India, but since the country is described as being divided into innumerable states, he is really envisaging the international world. "Protect all these royal families, cities, lands



and provinces, save them, cherish them, guard them, ward off invasion from them, give them peace and prosperity. Keep them free from all fear, calamity, and evil portent. Turn back the troops of their enemies and create in all the kings a desire to avoid fighting, attacking, quarrelling, or disputing with their neighbours. When the eighty-four thousand kings of the eighty-four thousand states are contented with their own territories, they will not attack one another or raise mutual strife. When all these kings think of their mutual welfare and feel mutual affection and joy, contented in their own dominions, India will be prosperous, well-fed, pleasant and populous." Here the Sutra soars to a lyrical, Utopian vision. "The earth will be fertile, and the months and seasons and years will all occur at the proper time. Planets and stars, moon and sun, will duly bring on the days and nights. Rain will fall upon the earth at the proper time. And all living beings will be rich with all manner of riches and corn, very prosperous but not covetous."

The linking of the ethical conduct of men and the life-sustaining regularity of the seasons recovers the Vedic perception that the cosmos is an orderly organization and that Dharma or morality is but the extension of this order into the last phase of cosmic evolution—the advent of man. Speculations on the right principles for the engagement with social reality have managed to link ontology, the purpose behind the creation of the world itself, with ethics, the moral conduct of man. We shall now try to see whether the adventure into the transcendent, pure metaphysical thought, will also converge at last to the same terminal.



## CHAPTER SIX

# Adventure into the Transcendent

## 1. *The Negative Systems*

THOUGH THE philosophical speculations of the Indian mind crystallised later into about half a dozen systems, all more or less affirmative and theistic, India had known also many negative and radical doctrines representing all possible shades of scepticism. This ferment of doubt and questioning goes back to pre-Buddhist times. Though the original writings of the radical thinkers have not survived, their views have been summarised in the Buddhist texts, especially the *Digha Nikaya*.<sup>1</sup>

We read of Sanjaya, who denied the possibility of definitive knowledge. "If you asked me whether there is another world, and if I believed that there was, I should tell you so. But that is not what I say. I do not say that it is so. I do not say that it is not so. Nor do I say that it is not not so." It is significant that Pyrrho (365-275 B.C.), the Greek philosopher who taught the same agnosticism, visited India along with Alexander's army. He may have come into contact with some intellectual descendants of Sanjaya. Since certainty was unattainable, Sanjaya taught that the wise man should seek tranquillity rather than certitude. Pyrrho also took the same line.

Katyayana resolved organic reality into the components of earth, water, fire, air and the vital principle. These elements remained distinct even in their combinations, which were the basis of all the qualitative changes we see in the world. Joy and sorrow were the principles of change or the motivations and inhibitions which led to change, thus making and unmaking individual personalities. Katyayana seems to have rejected emergent evolution and gone back to reductionism. That is, he did not accept the view that the combinations of elements could lead to new realities. Life may have a physico-chemical basis; but once it emerges, it seems to be a new reality and criteria like moral



values become valid in this new plane, though they may not be relevant to the analysis of the physics and chemistry of life. But Katyayana seems to have felt these emergent planes of evolution as somehow not real. "No man slays or causes to slay. Even if a man cleave another's head with a sharp sword, he does not take life, for the sword-cut passes between the elements." That is, the basic components of inorganic and organic life are indestructible and if the reality formed by their temporary combination is destroyed, no serious issues are involved, since morality itself is not real, belonging as it does to the transient world of temporary combinations of components. Apart from the negative drift of the thought, it must be noted that Katyayana was formulating an atomic theory, probably a century or more before Democritus in Greece developed a similar theory of unchanging, eternally existing components of physical reality. The Vaiseshika system would later take over this atomism.

Purana Kasyapa also rejected the validity of moral considerations. His reasons for this rejection are not clear. Probably he felt that ethics was an irrelevant interpolation in the stream of phenomena which were purely physico-chemical. More probably he felt that, even if the world of human actions was accepted as real, there was no justification for regarding it as a rational order where sin would taint and virtue purify and both would bring sure returns, punishment and reward. "He who performs an act or causes an act to be performed, he who destroys life, the thief, the house-breaker, the plunderer, the adulterer and the liar, commit no sin. Even if with a razor-sharp sword a man were to reduce all the life on earth to a single heap of flesh, he would commit no sin, neither would sin approach him. From liberality, self-control, abstinence and honesty is derived neither merit nor the approach of merit."

If Kasyapa's pessimism was due to loss of faith in the world as a rational order, Makkhali Gosala's pessimism had more sombre origins. He seems to have believed in a dark fatality, a rigid predestination which inexorably fulfilled itself, unmodified in the least by human initiative. "There is no human action, no strength, no courage, no human powers or endurance, which can affect one's destiny in this life. All beings, all that have breath, all that are born, all that have life, are without power,



- ✓ strength or virtue but are developed by destiny, chance and nature.
- ✓ Samsara (the round of birth and death) is measured out as with a bushel, with its joy and sorrow and its appointed end. It can neither be lessened nor increased. Just as a ball of thread will, when thrown, unwind to its full length, so fool and wise alike will take their course."

✓ In Ajita Kesakambala, the latent pessimism of the views, which regarded life as a transient juxtaposition of elements destined to fall apart and which felt that concepts of an after-life were mere fantasies, swells into a great Lucretian dirge. <sup>descent from here</sup> "There is no merit in alms-giving, sacrifice, or offering, no result or ripening of good or evil deeds. There is no passing from this world to the next. There is no after-life. Man is formed of the four elements. When he dies, earth returns to the aggregate of earth, water to water, fire to fire, and air to air, while the senses (capacity for sensation) vanish into space. Four men with the bier take up the corpse. They gossip about the dead man as far as the burning ground, where his bones turn the colour of a dove's wing, and his sacrifices end in ashes. They are fools who preach alms-giving, and those who maintain the existence of immaterial categories speak nonsense. When the body dies, both fool and wise alike are cut off and perish. They do not survive after death."

\* Kesakambala's doctrine has great affinities with that of the Lokayatikas, who claimed the material world to be the sole reality. They were also called Charvakas<sup>2</sup> after one of the exponents of this line of thought. This trend has considerable antiquity since the Buddhist texts refer to it. Manu also refers to nihilists and ✓ heretics. The founder of the school was supposed to be Brihaspati, a thinker of the Vedic period, but his writings have not come down to us. Our sources for the Lokayata doctrine are indirect: the references in Sankara's commentary on the *Brahma Sutras*,<sup>3</sup> in the *Sarva Siddhanta Samgraha*<sup>4</sup> attributed to Sankara, in Madhvacharya's *Sarva Darsana Samgraha*,<sup>5</sup> in Krishna Misra's allegorical and philosophical play, *Prabodha Chandrodaya*<sup>6</sup> and in a work on philosophy by Hari Chandra.<sup>7</sup> Being critical attacks of the system, these references cannot be accepted as completely objective summaries of the doctrine. In fact, Madhva describes the Lokayata doctrine as pure hedonism. "The only end of man is enjoyment produced by sensual pleasure ... While life re-



mains, let a man live happily. Let him feed on *ghee* even though he has to borrow money for it."

But Madhva lived in the thirteenth century and what he regards as the Lokayata doctrine may very well have been a later degeneration of the original thought, just as Epicureanism in the Greek tradition degenerated later into pure hedonism, though Epicurus himself had advocated sobriety and moderation. Krishna Misra gives a more suggestive appraisal. "Lokayata claims to be the only rational system. In it, only perceptual inference is authority. The elements are earth, water, fire and air. Wealth and enjoyment are the objects of human existence. Matter can think. There is no other world. Death is the end of all." But it is Sankara who summarises the doctrine most effectively, avoiding vulgarisation and bringing out the philosophical position taken up by the Lokayatikas, even though he himself finds it unacceptable. "The Lokayatikas are of the opinion that the body endowed with the quality of intelligence is the Self. Since intelligence is observed only where a body is observed while it is never seen without a body, they consider it to be an attribute of the body. They are of the opinion that a Self, separate from the body, does not exist. They assume that consciousness, although not observed in earth and other physical elements—either single or combined—may yet appear in them when transformed into the organisation of a body, so that consciousness springs from them. They maintain that sentience is analogous to the intoxicating quality or fermentation which arises when certain materials are mixed in certain proportions in the preparation of wine and that man is only a body qualified by consciousness. The body alone is what is conscious, is the Self. For wherever something exists if some other thing exists, and does not exist if that other thing does not exist, we determine the former thing to be a mere quality of the latter. For instance, light and heat we determine to be qualities of fire. And as life, movement, consciousness, remembrance and so on are observed only within bodies and not outside bodies, and as an abode of those qualities, different from the body, cannot be proved, it follows that they must be qualities of the body only. The Self therefore is not different from the body [in the opinion of the Lokayatikas]."

This doctrine is far different from the libertinism with which



popular opinion confused Lokayata thought. It was really a philosophy of materialism. Steadily developed, it could have led to an insight into the evolution of organic matter from inorganic, the advent of consciousness at the highest level of organic life and the physical and chemical bases of life and consciousness. "Who colours wonderfully the peacocks, who makes the cuckoo coo so well? There is, in respect of these, no cause other than nature."<sup>8</sup> But the tragedy of Indian materialism is that it was pulled back from an investigation of the evolutionary power of nature because of its disastrously negative epistemological assumptions. The Lokayatikas accepted the authority of perception, but they denied that perception gave any evidence in support of causation or a rational order in nature. Like Hume, centuries later, they denied that a causal relation between phenomena could ever be proved. Like Hume again, they denied that conscious life was a continuity, an integrated reality. With no order in nature to analyse and with no personal centre from which to analyse, the impulse towards the exploration of the outer and inner world was stifled at birth. What could have evolved into positive science stagnated as a nihilist philosophy.

Nevertheless, we must remember that the Lokayatikas valiantly resisted the hardening sacerdotalism, the blind faith in ritual and the exploitation of the people by the priestly class. Here they form a link between the Upanishads and Buddhism. "Why should we repeat the Vedas or offer this kind of sacrifices?" asks the Aitareya Brahmana. Likewise, Buddha's views against Vedic sacrifices, the memorizing and fruitless repetition of Vedic Mantras, the caste system, the authority of the Vedas and the worship of various deities, the magic rites and ascetic practices were all anticipated by the Lokayatikas. Their attack on ritualism and priest-craft, as reported by the *Sarva Darsana Samgraha*, was uncompromising. "Offerings to the sacred fire, the three Vedas, the ascetic's three staves and smearing oneself with ashes—these are the livelihood of those destitute of knowledge and manliness. If a beast slain in the Jyotistoma rite will itself go to heaven, why then does not the sacrificer forthwith offer his own father? If beings in heaven are gratified by our making offerings here, then why not give the food down below to those who are standing on housetops? If he who departs from the body goes to another



world, how is it that he comes not back again, restless for love of his kindred? Hence it is only as a means of livelihood that the Brahmins have established all these ceremonies for the dead." Lokayata tried to demolish superstitious growths with a vigorous hand. But, unlike Buddhism, it did not proceed to rebuild the foundations of belief and the moral basis of life. For detailed critical studies of Lokayata, Cowell,<sup>9</sup> Shastri<sup>10</sup> and Chattopadhyay<sup>11</sup> may be seen.

We have included Lokayata in the negative systems not because it was hostile to tradition, but because its criticism was not constructive in the final analysis. Traditionalism could also degenerate into a barren negativism, as is evidenced by the development of the Purva Mimamsa (First Interpretation). The classical texts of this doctrine are the *Karma Mimamsa Sutras* of Jaimini<sup>12</sup> and the commentary on them by Sabara Svami who probably belonged to the fifth century.<sup>13</sup> Prabhakara<sup>14</sup> in the seventh century and Kumarila<sup>15</sup> in the eighth wrote monumental commentaries on Sabara Svami and Jaimini.

Jaimini seems to have started with grave misgivings regarding the capacity of reason to reach truth. Reason is distorted by unconscious bias and conscious desire and even its most objective functioning cannot guarantee certitude. Acceptance of tradition seemed to restore to life some degree of stability and serenity. But it is in the interpretation of what constitutes tradition that Mimamsa went wrong through a narrow literalism. If the Vedas prescribe rituals, they also speculate with daring on the ultimate problems. But Mimamsa noted only the exhortation to ritual. According to Jaimini, "the main purpose of the Vedas is to denote some rite and therefore all those portions which do not speak explicitly of rituals should be considered redundant or figurative." To the Mimamsakas, the Vedas embody not so much eternal truths as eternal injunctions or laws which enjoin the performance of rites and rituals. To answer the query why these prescriptions should be obeyed, Mimamsa had to insist that the Vedas were revelations, peremptory and eternally valid. The paradox of Mimamsa is that the rigidity of the orthodox literalism made even theistic faith, a universal component of orthodoxy, unimportant. When the symbolic interpretation of ritual was resisted, there was no meaning to be sought in ritual action. The rite became not



only an obligatory duty, but the total fulfilment. Mimamsa emphatically maintained that man could get all his desires fulfilled by performing properly the rites enjoined in the Vedas and the question of the reality of God became irrelevant in this system. Jaimini, Sabara Svami and Kumarila do not have anything to say about the existence of God as the ground of the Universe. So barren and literal a creed could not strike roots. Udayana,<sup>16</sup> who wrote about 1200, inverted the paradox by showing that we would pay greater respect to the Vedas by not insisting on their status as revelation, by accepting their human, though inspired, authorship and by trying to understand their meaning through the exercise of reason. And later Mimamsakas like Khanda Deva and Gaga Bhatta veer to the position that the object of their system is not to deny the existence of God, but to specialise on the ritualistic aspect. For critical studies of Mimamsa, references are Jha,<sup>17</sup> Kane,<sup>18</sup> Keith,<sup>19</sup> Sarkar,<sup>20</sup> Shastri,<sup>21</sup> and Thadani.<sup>22</sup>

## II. Pluralist Systems

If Mimamsa began by rejecting reason in its solicitude for tradition and nearly ended up by rejecting God as well, in Nyaya we have the opposite paradox of a system founding itself on the bedrock of reason and finding a way to God through logic. The founder of the system is Gautama, also known as Ashtapada, attributed various dates from the first century B.C. to the third century A.D. Gautama's *Nyaya Sūtras*<sup>23</sup> were extensively worked over again in commentaries, interpretations and elaborations by a series of writers beginning with Vatsyayana<sup>24</sup> in the fifth century. The great names in this tradition are Vachaspati Misra,<sup>25</sup> Uddyotakara Bharadwaja,<sup>26</sup> Gangesa,<sup>27</sup> Viswanatha<sup>28</sup> and Dinnaga.<sup>29</sup> The continuity covers more than a millennium.

It is a relief to turn from Mimamsa to a system, the very first aphorism of whose founder shows the way to salvation through reason. Gautama's *Nyaya Sūtras* open with the statement that salvation is the ultimate objective of a spiritual aspirant, and that this perfection and freedom are possible through a proper understanding of sixteen principles which, on further reading, reveal themselves to be the rules and techniques of logical thinking. Some of these principles are sources and objects of authentic



knowledge, example, corroborative reasoning, fallacies, etc. Nyaya epistemology is realistic. It does not claim, like the idealists, that the reality of the external world depends on the perceiving mind. Its logic has the healthy earthiness of common sense, though it undertakes a brilliant research into the techniques of sound thinking, in which the value of perception, testimony, analogy and inference is brought out with clarity. If Aristotle established the syllogism as the fundamental principle of deductive reasoning in Europe, the Nyaya school quite independently arrived at it in India. There is a slight difference in form, as the Nyaya syllogism has five, instead of three, terms: theorem, reason, major premiss, minor premiss and conclusion. The Aristotelian form—all men are mortal, Socrates is a man, Socrates is mortal—will take this form in Nyaya syllogism: Socrates is mortal; for he is a man; all men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore Socrates is mortal. \*

While Mimamsa's excessively literal adoration of the Vedas impoverished their meaning, Nyaya found it possible to accept them as revelation and yet retain the freedom to interpret them creatively. Unaided reason may lead to a blind alley, they felt. As Bhartrhari said, mere inference is like groping in the dark. Nyaya accepts God as the efficient cause of the universe and the final source of inspiration, one of the most sublime fruits of which is the Vedas. Nyaya thought retains the pluralism of the commonsense outlook and reality, for it, consists of objects, souls and God.

If Nyaya was purely an investigation of the techniques of thinking, it would have been logic pure and simple. But it is a philosophy, since it seeks to harmonise reason and tradition. It is logic as understood and used by St. Thomas Aquinas. It reaches the status of philosophy also by emphasizing salvation as the ultimate objective. Clear reason is the road to salvation, for from false notions, from an erroneous appraisal of reality, spring a false activity of the soul, wrong ideals, misguided attachments and loyalties. Freedom means release from the tyranny of desire. Man is goaded into vain activity through the defects of aversion, attachment and stupidity. Attachment includes lust, avarice and covetousness. Stupidity includes misapprehension, suspicion, conceit and carelessness. To the logicians turned philosophers, it is



not surprising that stupidity should be the worst fault; it is what breeds aversion and attachment. Nyaya thus becomes a full-fledged philosophy, complete with an ethics which is integrally related to its central principle—reason. Nyaya gave the Indian mind a clear method of reasoning. Other systems, even when their conclusions were different, drew on Nyaya for techniques of argument and presentation. For critical studies of Nyaya, reference may be made to Atreya,<sup>30</sup> Bhaduri,<sup>31</sup> Chatterjee,<sup>32</sup> Jha,<sup>33</sup> Keith,<sup>34</sup> Mishra,<sup>35</sup> Randle,<sup>36</sup> Vidyabhusana<sup>37</sup> and Ingalls.<sup>38</sup>

The Vaiseshika system was founded by Kanada,<sup>39</sup> attributed various dates from the third century B.C. to the eighth century A.D. Originally it was an independent system, but later it merged with Nyaya to form a composite Nyaya-Vaiseshika system. This happened because the systems were in a sense complementary. Nyaya emphasized the means of knowledge while Vaiseshika analysis proceeded to identify the various categories that could be distinguished by knowledge. Kanada's aphorisms were commented upon and elaborated by Prasasta Pada,<sup>40</sup> Sridhara,<sup>41</sup> Sivaditya<sup>42</sup> and others.

The system is known as Vaiseshika because it tried to analyse the specificity by which categories could be distinguished. All phenomena were classed under six logical categories: substance, quality, action, generality, particularity and inherence. The most interesting is the last category of inherence or inseparable connection (*samavaya*), which, being clearly distinguished from that of accident or separable connection (*samyoga*), is described as the relations between a thing and its properties, motion and the object in motion, the genus and its species, the whole and its parts.

Atomism is a fundamental feature of Vaiseshika thought. In fact, the name of the founder of the system, Kanada or atom-eater, may be a rhetorical title rather than a proper noun. Indestructible, eternal atoms are the bricks of reality. Atoms are of different kinds and the plurality of the world arises from their combinations. Each kind of atom is distinct by virtue of its own ultimate particular quality (*Visesha*). In trying to enumerate the categories of physical reality built up by the combination of atoms, Vaiseshika was making an attempt similar to that of Galileo who sought to analyse the elements of physical reality built up by the



combinations of the Democritan atom. For, under substances we find the primordial elements and time and space, under qualities we find the dimensional magnitudes like number and measure, besides colour, taste and smell, and under action, various forms of motion. The identification of action with motion brings the system surprisingly near the European scientific scheme which reduces all phenomena to motion.

The first difficulty confronted by Vaiseshika thought in its analysis was the problem of sentience. If Democritus claimed that there was nothing in reality except the atoms and the void, we must also remember that the Democritan atom had the latent capacity for sentience. Vaiseshika also seems to accept a similar position. The mind, according to it, is an atomic substance and an internal sense. But the difficulty was not still solved. As the mind also is atomic, it can only comprehend a single object at any given moment. But the functions of memory, imagination and thinking are a continuum and therefore cannot be explained by an atomic mechanism like the mind. Therefore, Vaiseshika posits a soul, which is distinct from the body, senses and mind. It is the soul which possesses consciousness as an attribute. The Vaiseshika system thus gets committed to a dualism of matter and mind and a pluralism of souls. \*

The second difficulty was this. What was the power that impelled the atoms to combine, dissolve and recombine in such a way as to produce the order of the universe which was undeniable and self-evident? Kanada proposed that the atoms moved under the action of an impersonal force or law, Adrishta, the "invisible." But naming is not explaining, especially when mysterious, invisible principles are invoked. If the world is regarded as a mechanism consisting of atoms and souls, some principle is needed for the synchronised, concordant, ordered action of the total mechanism. It was difficult to see how an unintelligent principle could hold together the *disjecta membra* of the world. This is the problem which Leibnitz confronted later and the later Vaiseshika solution approximates to the Leibnitzian. Not blind Adrishta, but an intelligent God, is the principle which gives order and unity to the cosmos. This is the position taken by Udayana in his *Nyaya Kusumanjali*. The eternal existence of the atoms is not surrendered. But on the analogy that even if clay is available,



a potter is needed to mould a pot, God becomes the architect of the Universe.

✓ Consciousness is an attribute of the soul, but not necessarily an inherent property of it. For consciousness, the soul needs the link with the body, senses and mind. The problem now arises as to what is the condition of the soul freed from the bonds of the body. Mandana raises the criticism that when the soul is freed from the qualities of joy and pain produced by contact with the world through the instrument of the body, the emptiness may not be different from the total destruction of the self. This type of freedom may come perilously near the unconscious state of a stone. Sridhara tries to meet this criticism with the argument that the natural state of the soul is not one of nescience but a positive state and when freed from the body, the soul can enjoy this state. Descending from the transcendental to the mundane level, the Vaiseshika system teaches an acceptable ethics. The highest kind of pleasure, according to Prasasta Pada, is the pleasure of the wise, peaceful and contented, free from the tyranny of desire. For critical studies of Vaiseshika reference may be made to Faddegon,<sup>43</sup> Keith<sup>44</sup> and Ui.<sup>45</sup>

✓ The Samkhya system was founded by Kapila, believed to have lived in the sixth century B.C. The text of his *Samkhya Sutras* has been lost. The treatise we have is by Isvara Krishna<sup>46</sup> of the fifth century A.D. Commentaries on Isvara Krishna were written by Gaudapada<sup>47</sup> in the seventh century and Vachaspati Misra<sup>48</sup> in the ninth. A text known as *Samkhya Sutras* or *Samkhya Pravachana*<sup>49</sup> has come down to us. Regarded at first as the original text of Kapila's, today it is realised to be a work belonging to the fifteenth century. Commentaries on it were written by Aniruddha<sup>50</sup> and Vijnana Bhikshu.<sup>51</sup> The latter belonged probably to the sixteenth century.

✓ The system is called Samkhya (enumerative) because it enumerates the categories of reality. There are twenty-five of these. But ✓ the two major categories are Purusha, spirit or soul, and Prakriti, matter or nature, the other categories being the various manifestations that emerge as the evolution of nature proceeds. For ✓ Samkhya can be justly described as a theory of evolution. Prakriti is compounded of three qualities, powers or potentialities. The terms are difficult to translate because they telescope in their



connotation both physical conditions and psychological and even moral dispositions. Sattva is static energy, psychological poise, moral perfection. Rajas is dynamic energy, psychological extroversion, impassioned activism. Tamas is physical inertia, mental apathy, the dark turbulence of the primitive impulses. This scheme is surprisingly like the psychology of Plato's *Republic* with its reasonable, passionate and lustful parts of the soul, with the very important difference that, in Samkhya, they are the features of matter or nature and not of the Purusha. Nature is static when the three potentialities balance. But when any imbalance emerges, process is initiated and this process is both an evolution and a cyclical recurrence. It is cyclical because any development that results carries its own seeds of imbalance and therefore development and decay alternate. But it is mostly individual manifestations that emerge and disappear in this cycle, while the longer trend is an evolutionary trend.

In its explanation of the mechanism of evolution, Samkhya is more Lamarckian than Darwinian. According to Darwin, variations in the capacities of organisms arise by accident and those variations that confer advantages in the struggle for survival are selected and stabilised by evolution. According to Lamarck, as well as Samkhya, the need of the organism generates the function (sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch) and the function produces the organ (eye, ear, nose, tongue and skin). It is worthwhile remembering in this connection that Bergson's creative evolution and the philosophy of the biologist, Lecomte du Nouy, affirm a broad inner orientation or self-direction in nature, even though the Darwinian principle of selection through the competitive struggle for survival is not overlooked. Another feature of Samkhya thought is that even the brain and mind are physical realities produced by the evolution of matter or nature.

What is the role of the Purusha in this evolution? It is that of a catalyst or external activating principle which ferments phenomena without itself becoming involved in them. "There is a ruling influence of Purusha over Prakriti (the evolving world) caused by their proximity, just as the magnet draws iron to itself. That is, the proximity of Purusha to Prakriti impels the latter to go through the phases of production. This sort of attraction between the two leads to evolution, but in no other sense is Purusha an



agent, or concerned in creation at all.”<sup>52</sup> Samkhya keeps the Purusha apart from Prakriti, probably because Kapila held a pessimistic view regarding life. “Few are these days of joy, few are these days of sorrow. Wealth is like a swollen river. Youth is like the crumbling bank of a swollen river. Life is like a tree on the crumbling bank.”<sup>53</sup> The classical Hindu view integrated all the planes of reality, mundane and transcendental, with its scheme of the four ends of man and the doctrine of incarnations affirmed that God intervened periodically whenever imbalances emerged in historical existence. The Buddhist doctrine of the repeated incarnations of the Bodhisattva, similarly, revealed involvement in historical existence as the means of the highest, selfless service. But Kapila seems to have regarded historical existence as a sorry thing in the last analysis and he wanted to preserve the Purusha or Self uncontaminated by the world.

This attitude moulds his theory of salvation, which is essentially rising above the pain and joy, both unreliably transient, resulting from involvement in the world. Bondage arises from not discriminating between the ego, a perishable psychological complex structured by evolving matter, and the Self, high above this stream of nature. The Self is beyond good and evil, joy and pain, birth and death. “Neither I am, nor is aught mine, nor do I exist.” That is, the empirical ego is an illusion. The fundamental reality is the immutable Self, uncontaminated by the world.

Samkhya outlined a discipline for attaining this realisation which was further elaborated in Patanjali's treatise on Yoga,<sup>54</sup> on which Vyasa and Vachaspati wrote important commentaries.<sup>55</sup> Yoga means yoking or disciplining oneself so that the real state of the Self can be realised and relished. It consists of eight steps, broadly falling into three types of discipline: ethical, physical and introspective. Yama is the control of desire, the acceptance of celibacy and non-violence, the abandonment of all self-seeking. Non-violence is not mere abstention from aggressive action, even aggressive attitude, but a positive sympathy for all. It should lead to serenity of mind. Niyama is the faithful observance of certain preliminary rules of cleanliness, study and piety. Asana and Pranayama are physical disciplines, the first being the adoption of the best physical posture conducive to meditation and the second rhythmic breathing so that the vital function will



look after itself smoothly while the mind begins its difficult, upward ascent. The next triad is a progressive psychological discipline. Pratyahara means the control of all senses, their withdrawal from all sense objects, so that the restless tides of sensory stimuli from the external world may cease to beat upon the mind and distract it. Then comes Dharana, concentration on any single object or concept. It is essentially a test or practice for developing the ability to keep the mind concentrated on any particular idea. The next stage is Dhyana or meditation, an intense concentration on the depths of one's being. If the concentration is sufficiently intense, the mind not only grasps the object of thought, but begins to penetrate into it. The final stage, Samadhi, completes this movement, for here the distinction of knower and known, mind and its object, is extinguished. The personal centre which was till now the mind, effects the great transition to its real locus, the noumenal Self, liberated from all involvement with phenomena.

Confronted by the tragic in life, the Hindu and Buddhist doctrines of incarnation give the humanistic solution that the acceptance of involvement, but for the sake of others, is the only answer. The Samkhya solution, in the last analysis, is an aesthetic solution. If one is involved in the wayward drift of life, one would encounter storms and quiet spells, oscillate between joy and sorrow. But if one is detached, life is a grand spectacle, with that transformation of even the painful into an ineffable joy of experience which a great tragic drama achieves. Samkhya here anticipates Nietzsche who suggested that the wisest way to view the world is as an aesthetic and dramatic spectacle. "The evolution of Prakriti" says one commentator on Kapila, "has no purpose except to provide a spectacle for the soul." And Isvara Krishna states: "As a dancer, after showing herself to the audience, leaves off dancing, so does nature reveal herself to the soul and then disappear." In Samadhi, the final stage of Yoga, consciousness ceases to be identified with the empirical ego, involved in the vicissitudes of the world, and achieves a god-like comprehension.

We should note that Samkhya is both pluralistic and atheistic. Each soul is an individual Purusha. Samkhya could find no argument in believing in a God. If God is perfect, He has no



need to create the world; if He is imperfect He is not God. Further, matter is also eternal, since creation is inconceivable, for the world cannot be fashioned out of nothing. Lastly, this world with its chaos and moral anarchy and suffering cannot be the creation of a benevolent God. In later Yoga, as opposed to the original Samkhya, we do come across the concept of Isvara or Lord. However, He is not strictly God, but only a special soul or Purusha, all goodness and free from all defilement, who helps other souls towards their self-realisation. The goal of the soul is not union with this Isvara, but the realisation of its own transcendental but separate state. For critical studies on Samkhya, the authorities are Garbe,<sup>56</sup> Ghosh,<sup>57</sup> Johnston,<sup>58</sup> Keith,<sup>59</sup> the Majundars<sup>60</sup> and Mukerji.<sup>61</sup> For Yoga, Dasgupta,<sup>62</sup> Danielou,<sup>63</sup> Coster<sup>64</sup> and Behanan<sup>65</sup> may be referred to.

### III. *Monist Identity*

The systems considered so far have been dualistic. They maintain the distinction of nature and spirit, body and soul and a theistic system like Nyaya conceives of soul and God as separate entities. The systems are also pluralistic, for both Nyaya and Samkhya affirm the souls of individuals to be distinct entities. For their doctrines they rely on the interpretation of the Vedas and the Upanishads. But there were many currents of thought in the Upanishads and if some of them favour dualism, others affirm the great equation that God and Soul are an identity. The Advaita (Non-Duality) school is the statement of this monism. It is also called Uttara Mimamsa (Later Interpretation) as contrasted with Purva Mimamsa, which descended to pure ritualism, and Vedanta, the terminal or fruition of the transcendental quest of the Vedas.

The founder of this system is Badarayana,<sup>66</sup> who probably wrote about 200 B.C. The doctrine was developed by Gaudapada<sup>67</sup> and Govinda and found its most magnificent exposition in the work of Sankara<sup>68</sup> (788-820). The brilliant achievement of this thinker from Kerala has won for him a status in the Indian tradition similar to the combined status of St. Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant in Europe's religious and philosophical thought, in spite of the fact that he died at the early age of thirty-two.

Defining Reality as that which exists by its self-sufficiency,



Vedanta tries to clarify the relation of this ground, the Brahman, to the world. It thus arrives at a theory of causation which is significantly different from the theories of both Nyaya and Samkhya. The Nyaya theory of causation is one of origination. Effects are created from out of several causes. The effect is previously non-existent in any one cause. We must remember that Nyaya realism claims eternal durability for matter, although it is theistic. Thus, God creates the universe as an agent, like a potter making a pot out of clay. Both God and matter are needed for fashioning the world, which, when it takes shape, is a new reality not wholly contained in any one of the two factors. The world is originated as an emergent reality. The Samkhya theory of causation is one of transformation, where the effect already exists in the cause and is merely brought out in a different form. A familiar example is milk turning into curd. The entire phenomenal world thus represents but manifold evolutions of the same matter. The Purusha is not involved in this process at all. The third explanation, which is the one favoured by Vedanta, is that of apparent transfiguration. Instances are a rope in dim light mistaken for a snake or water seen in a mirage. The entire phenomenal world is but an appearance projected by the basic reality, Brahman. It will be noted that in these three theories, there is a progressive reduction of difference and increase in identity between cause and effect.

The world is thus an appearance. The word used is Maya. Its popular meaning is "illusion." But Sankara uses it in a technical and not popular sense. This very important distinction is frequently forgotten and this leads to serious misunderstanding. Maya is not illusion or phantasm, but phenomenon, as contrasted with the ground reality, the noumenon. The world is not an empty and insubstantial illusion, but a superimposition on a ground. As far as Sankara is concerned, he has clarified the position beyond any ambiguity. The world is not something which is altogether non-existent and which cannot possibly exist, like "a flower sprouting in the sky or the son of a barren woman." The world has no absolute reality, but it has empirical, phenomenal reality. It is derived from the ground reality by a refraction brought about by the conditioned perception and experience of the empirical subject. Just as refraction makes the emergent light lower in frequency



than the incident light, this refraction which has its locus in the empirical mind and originates in its constitution, makes a higher reality appear as a lower one. Just as an empirical reality, a rope, appears as a seeming reality, a snake, the transcendental reality, Brahman, appears as the lower, empirical reality, the world; conscious spirit appears as non-conscious matter.

But the empirical self also belongs to the same plane as the phenomenal world, the world of contingent reality. Therefore, on this plane, it would be dangerously premature to start denying the reality of the world. Science has its validity, since it is an empirical investigation of the empirical world. Sankara accepts the evolutionism of Samkhya and anticipates Bergson and Lecomte du Nouy by affirming that the functional needs of the organism for a diversified sensory seizure of reality explain the evolution of sensory and motor organs. The demands of morality, likewise, have their validity. The doctrine of Maya or the phenomenal world cannot be used to weaken moral distinctions, warns Sankara. For they are real within the world and are binding for those who live in the world. By a brilliant reasoning, he shows that, even to the emancipated soul, morality need not cease to be real. For the emancipated soul will realise the unity of all being, and the ego-centered drives will automatically subside, thereby making moral commands, not invalid, but no longer relevant or necessary as a restraining force. At this level, morality, till now an exterior command, becomes transformed into an interior disposition by the emancipation of the self from ego-centrism.

Just as, from among the various theories of causation, Advaita selects the one which ensures essential identity between cause and effect, Brahman and the world, in the theories of the relation between Brahman and the soul also, it opts for the explanation which secures such an identity. From Badarayana's work we find that there is already considerable difference of views among various thinkers. The school of Ashmarathya propounded a doctrine of difference-cum-identity. The individual souls were like sparks issuing forth from a central fire. They were identical in essence with the central fire but there was also the difference that distinguishes the part from the whole, the individual evolutionary entity from the total evolving reality. The school of Audulomi held that the individual souls were different from the



Supreme, just as a bangle and ear-ornament are different by virtue of their form and name, though both may be fashioned of gold. With the dropping of their embodied limitation, the individual souls become one with the Supreme. Incidentally, these views will hold the ground even after the advent of Advaita, as we shall see later. According to the third view, held by Kashakrishna and elaborated by Sankara, it is the Supreme Soul that exists also as the individual soul. Just as the same visage can be repeated in myriad reflections, in a mirror, in the bright blade of a sword, in the luminous miniature surface of a gem, the Brahman is reflected in the empirical ego of individuals. The sun's image glows like a second sun on the surface of a pool. But there is only one sun and only the real sun remains when the pool dries up.

The Supreme Soul is seen as the lower reality of the individual ego, just as Brahman is mistaken for the world, through Maya. Maya is phenomenon mistaken for the noumenon by the empirical mind. How does the mistake arise? Through Avidya, ignorance or lack of illumination. Avidya and Maya are complementaries, the subjective and objective sides, phenomenological experience and the phenomenal world. It is through Avidya that Reality, a Parmenidean plenum, changeless and enduring, is seen as an ever-changing flux, the world evolving within the framework of space, time and causation. In the last analysis, Sankara has to admit that there is an unsolved mystery here. Maya and Avidya are inexplicable. The soul, which is pure knowledge, somehow lapses into Avidya, just as Brahman, which is pure Being, appears as the space-time-cause world of Becoming. This may appear as a serious weakness in Sankara's system. But let us not forget that a similar difficulty arises in the scientific scheme of the universe also. The physical world, in which only the purely dimensional magnitudes, like mass and frequency of vibrations, seem real to science, appears before us as a dome of many-coloured glass, a rich, sensuous tissue. This mystery too has not been solved yet by thought. Eddington has brought out brilliantly this incongruity between the pointer-readings which alone quantitative science accepts as real and the full-blooded quality of phenomena.

Sankara harmonises the intellectual's conception of Brahman with the God of theistic religion. "Brahman is realised in its



two-fold aspect. In one aspect, it is conceived as endowed with the adjuncts of name and form, that are subject to modification and cause differentiation. In the other, it is just the opposite (bereft of all adjuncts), the transcendental Reality." This latter answers to the essential reality of which Eckhart speaks, deeper than God himself, and to the abyss or groundlessness of Boehme. We may apply the adjectives, "real", "conscious" and "blissful" to Brahman, since Brahman includes all selves and these may have such qualities. But, really, it is beyond the reach of all definitions. Brahman, conceived of as qualified by attributes, is Isvara, the God of theism. Isvara can be regarded as the creator of the world, so long as the world appearance is regarded as real. But the determinate personal Lord is really a refracted image created by the mind, which belongs to the phenomenal world, of the indeterminate intelligence, Brahman.

The individual can go a long way towards realisation by dedicating his life to the concept of a personal deity. But the final liberation comes with the realisation of the soul's identity with Brahman. Here, Sankara, the intellectual, realises the limitations of the intellect. At this level, reason is no longer sufficient and we need intuition. Sankara accepts the Upanishadic analysis of the four levels of consciousness, the waking, dreaming, deep sleep and the transcendental states, and he also accepts the Yoga technique for this difficult inward journey. But, whereas in the Samkhya theory of Yoga, even at the peak of being, the soul remains as a separate entity, in the Advaita interpretation of Yoga, the soul realises the unity of being, its non-seperateness from all that is. To be Brahman is not to be regarded as the loss of individuality. It is not extinction, rather it is the expansion of one's individuality into the infinitude of Brahman. It is the sense of personality that is bondage; that of universality is freedom.

The person who has reached realisation is a Jivanmukta, one who is liberated even while living. Sankara once again corrects any tendency to interpret his system as world-negation. The world-appearance continues to be real as phenomenon, though the liberated person is no longer deluded by it. Like a drop of water on the waxy surface of a lotus leaf, which does not get absorbed into the plant tissue but remains in rounded isolation like a pearl, the emancipated individual lives in the world without



being involved in its eddies. But he cannot live in spiritual isolation. Since he has realised the unity of being, he has to work for the liberation of others who are still in bondage. Sankara's doctrine does not lead to passive withdrawal but is a doctrine of activism, for the obligation to work lasts as long as life lasts. But the motivation now is not the satisfaction of ego-centered drives, but the welfare of the world. "He who has reached the all-penetrating Atman enters into the all." Caste distinctions and social hierarchy cease to have any meaning now. "He who has learned to look upon the phenomenal world in the light of non-dualism is my true teacher, be he a Pariah or a Brahmin." Ritualism also has no meaning, since liturgy is no substitute for illumination, nor ceremony for realisation. Ritual prohibitions can also be ignored if the sense of universality is there. A touching incident in Sankara's own life shows that this transcendentalist was after all a sensitive human being. Monks are supposed to have severed all worldly ties and they cannot perform the funeral rites of relatives. In open defiance of this rule, Sankara performed the obsequies of his mother and thus incurred the serious opposition of his community.

The critical literature on Vedanta is vast. Useful select references are Abhedananda,<sup>69</sup> Bhattacharya,<sup>70</sup> Das,<sup>71</sup> Deussen,<sup>72</sup> Guenon,<sup>73</sup> Mahadevan<sup>74</sup> and Sircar.<sup>75</sup>

#### IV. *Patterns of Polarised Dualism*

In the brilliantly structured thought of Sankara, certain difficulties were latent. If the soul is absolutely identical with the Brahman, how can it ever accept the phenomenon as the noumenon? If the soul is deceived by Avidya, does it not amount to saying that the Brahman is also deceived, since soul and Brahman are absolutely identical? It is with the empirical self, the core of personality which is a psychological complex of character, attitudes, preferences, that a person starts on the journey towards realisation. Will it be logical to say that at the end of the journey, this empirical self realises its identity with the Brahman, when the empirical self, along with the phenomenal world, belongs to the plane of contingent and not absolute reality? The end of the journey reveals not so much that soul and Brahman are identical as that



Brahman is self-identical, since there is no self other than Brahman. This does not look like a meaningful statement. What is the meaning of a journey when at its end it is revealed that the goal alone exists and the journey and the entity which made the journey are not real? On the other hand, if the empirical self, with its limitations of creaturehood, is regarded as working its way towards the creator and becoming transformed when it reaches godhead, the journey becomes meaningful and no logical difficulties arise. This latter view will also have a rich emotional dynamic, of the finite soul yearning for union with the infinite, which the purely intellectual statement of monism cannot possibly generate. It is significant here that Sankara, the poet, is at variance with Sankara, the philosopher, and surrenders rigorous monism for a position which suggests dualism. In one of his hymns, he says: "Lord, it is the waves that get merged in the ocean, and not the ocean in the waves. So, when all limitations are removed from me, it is I who become merged in Thee and not Thou in me." The rise of dualist theories even after Sankara does not therefore need any further explanation. But unlike the earlier dualist systems, like Nyaya for instance, the later systems were patterns of polarised dualism, for God and man were conceived of as held together in a field of attraction linked by lines of force as in a magnetic field.

Sankara had tried to synthesise philosophical monism and the theism of religion. But Isvara or the Personal God, in his system, came very near to being nothing more than a refracted image of Brahman, as conceived by the conditioned human mind. The Pratyabhijna doctrine, or Kashmir Saivism, tried to secure for the Absolute warm positive attributes in less equivocal terms. Vasugupta<sup>76</sup> of the eighth century, his disciple Kallata,<sup>77</sup> Somananda<sup>78</sup> who wrote about 900, Utpala<sup>79</sup> who wrote about 930, his disciple Abhinava Gupta,<sup>80</sup> and Kshemaraja<sup>81</sup> are the thinkers who developed this doctrine.

Unlike classic Advaita, this system conceives of the Supreme Being as endowed with a personality. Creation is the Supreme Lord's manifestation of Himself to Himself, like a reflection of God in a mirror which also is God Himself. The individual is none other than the Supreme Lord in so far as He has given His all to it, namely His freewill, independence and absoluteness. The



identity of the Soul to the Lord is established by the fact that it has the capacity to know the whole universe and the freedom to do all acts, which are divine characteristics. But in its ignorance as an embodied being in the world, the self forgets its divine nature. Deliverance lies in the clear recognition (Pratyabhijna) of the self as the Supreme Being.<sup>82</sup> It is clear that this doctrine prefers the difference-cum-identity of Ashmarathya and Audulomi to the absolute monism of Badarayana and Sankara. Bhaskara in the ninth and Yadava in the twelfth centuries also took this view. The Saiva Siddhanta<sup>83</sup> of South India moves much further towards pluralism in its emphasis on theism. To Siva, the Lord (Pati), belong the Pasu (literally, cattle), the infinite hosts of souls. He is not their creator, since they are eternal. The soul is distinct from the body, spirit from matter, which latter is an unconscious object of experience. The Lord acts through His Sakti, which is personified, conscious energy.

In Tantra, monism is theoretically accepted, but practice moves far in the direction of dualism. The great texts of this doctrine begin to appear from the seventh century onwards, the more important of them being the Kularnava Tantra, the Maha Nirvana Tantra, the Prapancha Sara Tantra attributed to Vidya Sankara of the thirteenth or fourteenth century, the Kula Chudamani Tantra, the Paduka Panchaka and the Shat Chakra Nirupana. Tantra

In the monist statement, Sakti or Prakriti or energy is accepted as the attribute of Purusha or Brahman, the Supreme Being or pure consciousness. But in the esoteric thought of Tantra, the two concepts are separately personalised as Siva and Sakti. The ancient cult of the Mother Goddess flows into this tradition to make Sakti the supreme deity in practice. The magical tradition of the Atharva Veda makes the Tantra ritual esoteric and there is a great growth of mystic spells and diagrams and gestures. Pure Tantra accepts the technique of Yoga along with its psychological theories and prescribes a discipline by which the libidinal energy can be sublimated and the self merged with the supreme consciousness. At a lower level, the cult of Devi, the Goddess-Mother who is the joyous creative principle of nature, sanctions the fullest participation in all the pleasures of living, including food, drink and sex. Too sharp a contrast is sometimes drawn between the layman and the initiate, with the result that the latter



is regarded as above the obligations of morality and among certain sects this has led to appalling excesses. But certain poetic perceptions still remain valid. The Dionysian surge of the life-force is realised vividly. The dualism of mind and matter is resolved, because it is the Divine Mother who pervades the whole world, giving birth to all things from the highest to the lowest and manifesting her majesty both as mind and matter. They are like twin children held in the embrace of the same mother. The static and the dynamic principles in creation are seen as complementaries, indissolubly united. In metaphor, apart from Sakti, Siva is a corpse and apart from Siva, energy is blind, undirected force. Creation is the eternal dance of Kali, cosmic energy, on the breast of Siva, cosmic consciousness. If there is the danger of amorality, there is also exalted poetry in the concept of the Yogi, called the Superman or Vira, the hero. Says the Kularnava Tantra: "Like the motion of the moon and the sun, of the stars and the planets, lifted above the world, in the depths of space, is the path of the Yogi. Like the path of the birds in the sky and of fish in the depths, invisible (to the world) is this path. He relishes all joys and no evil sullies him. In contact with everything like the wind, penetrating everything like ether, the Yogi remains always pure like bathers in a river."

Yet another tradition which sought to combine monism and theistic personalism was the school of Visishtadvaita<sup>84</sup> or qualified monism founded by Ramanuja in the eleventh century, the basic texts being his commentaries on the Brahma Sutras<sup>85</sup> and the Gita.<sup>86</sup> According to Ramanuja, Brahman is at the same time transcendent and immanent. The ultimate is thus qualified by two different forms or characters. Brahman is the only absolute and independent reality. Material objects and individual selves are grounded in and dependent on Brahman. There is difference as well as identity between Brahman as absolute and Brahman as embodied, and therefore, between Brahman and the Self. Prakriti or the material ground of the world is not something totally separate from spirit, as Samkhya conceived it, but is a part of Brahman and controlled by Him, as the human body is controlled from within by the spirit. The world therefore is no illusion. Ramanuja uses the term Maya, but with a different meaning. It does not mean magical illusion, but the creative



power of Brahman, which is magical, in the sense of being a residual mystery.<sup>87</sup>

Sankara the philosopher, as distinct from the writer of devotional lyrics, is a pure intellectual who saw Brahman as pure consciousness and equated salvation with knowledge. For Ramanuja, Brahman is not pure consciousness alone but a being among whose attributes is consciousness. There are other attributes too, which make Ramanuja's Brahman a personal deity who is the fountain of mercy. Thus, although Ramanuja believes in salvation through grace, it seems impossible for his kindly Brahman to be ever ungracious. This Brahman is not free, for He is bound irresistibly to his devotees and must serve them. For them also, the way to salvation is not the road of the cold intellect but the soaring flight of devotion. Devotion finds its culmination in an intuitive realisation of God. It is important to realise that Ramanuja does not imply here a mystique of mere emotionalism. He insists on an elaborate preparation for the life of devotion. The discipline includes discrimination, emancipation from material obsessions, continuous thinking of God, doing good to others, wishing well to all, non-violence, integrity, compassion and pervasive optimism. Thus devotion is not mere emotionalism, but includes the training of the will as well as the intellect. It leads to a consistent ethics and it is important to remember that the devotional movement proved to be one of the greatest solvents of caste distinctions in India's social history.

The Dvaitadvaita (Dual-Non-dual) system of Nimbarka,<sup>88</sup> a Telugu Brahmin who belonged to the twelfth century, is not very much different from that of Ramanuja. Kesava Kashmirin<sup>89</sup> wrote a commentary on the Gita which elaborated Nimbarka's views. The world is an evolutionary transformation of Brahman, who is conceived of on the pattern of personalistic theism as Isvara, the Lord, or Purushottama, the Supreme Being. Soul and nature are evolutes from Isvara. While both soul and Isvara are selfconscious, the former is limited, the latter is not. While the soul is the enjoyer, the material world is the enjoyed (the means and object of experience) and Isvara or God is the supreme controller.

Madhva,<sup>90</sup> a Kanarese from Udipi who belonged to the thirteenth century, completely broke with monism and formulated a system



which was dualist because God was different from the world and the human soul, and also pluralist because the souls were separate entities. God is existence-consciousness-bliss. He maintains the reality of the world and its absolute distinction from Him, but He controls and guides nature so that it evolves into an orderly world in which individual selves may live and act and realise their moral destiny. He is not embodied in the world, but is its creator and governor. The history of the world is the revelation of God's perfection and of man's progressive self-realisation. It is the constant consciousness of his dependence on, and not the false notion of identity with, Brahman that can save man and liberate him from bondage. The logic of dualism and the contrast between a creator who is infinite and the creature who is finite leads Madhva inevitably to the doctrine of grace. But in the Indian soil, where the doctrine of Karma or responsibility is deep-rooted, it loses the Augustinian harshness. God's omnipotence makes His choice absolutely unconditioned theoretically, but it will be odd if indeed He chooses to be arbitrary. Madhva finally arrives at the position that the grace of the Lord is proportioned to the intensity of our devotion. For critical studies on Madhva, see Aiyar,<sup>91</sup> Maitra<sup>92</sup> and Rao.<sup>93</sup>

✓ Vallabha,<sup>94</sup> a Telugu Brahmin of the fifteenth century who migrated to the north, was the founder of a system known as pure monism. In the qualified monism of Ramanuja, the distinction of whole and part is never obliterated between Brahman and the soul. For Vallabha, the individual is of identical essence with God and the analogy of sparks to fire is a favourite figure with him. Sankara's monism is blurred by the intriguing concepts of Avidya and Maya, subjective error and objective emergence of phenomena and the field of space, time and causation. For Vallabha, there is no phenomenal veil obscuring the noumenon. He therefore claims his monism to be even purer than that of Sankara. The creation of the world means just the manifestation of God's being as the world of matter, time and selves. But there is a progressiveness in this manifestation and therefore an implication of levels. Brahman is of the essence of existence, consciousness and bliss. In the material world, only the quality of existence is manifested. In individual selves, both existence and consciousness are manifested. When the individual liberates himself from



the bonds of ignorance and of worldly entanglements, the divine quality of bliss will also be finally manifested.

The Vaishnavite movement of Bengal<sup>95</sup> represented by Chaitanya<sup>96</sup> of the fifteenth century, Jiva Goswami<sup>97</sup> of the sixteenth and Baladeva<sup>98</sup> of the eighteenth, resiled from both pure monism and pure dualism and posited a trans-logical dual-nondual relation between God and soul. To these men, the Advaita conception of Brahman as pure passive consciousness seemed incomplete. There are in the Absolute three ultimate powers: the essential or internal power which is the energy of pure consciousness; the intermediate or self-creative power which is the subjective energy manifesting selves; and the external or world-creative power which is the objective energy creating the material world. The individual selves are conscious and atomic entities. As revelations of the divine energy which stand between God and the world, selves are higher than nature and can transcend it. They participate in the subjective consciousness of God, though not in the divine consciousness itself. The self is similar to God in its gifts of consciousness and self-determination, but being a finite, limited and dependent part of God, it is also different from Him. So the relation between God and the self, as also between God and the world, is one of difference as well as non-difference, just as the rays of the sun are non-different from the sun in luminosity but also different from it in being but its parts. Around this metaphysical core, the Vaishnavite movement developed a warm, sensuous cult of adoration of Krishna, conceived of as the personal God. The movement, thus, was a development of the cult of devotional ecstasy which went back to the remote past. "There is no bliss in finite things, the Infinite alone is bliss," said the Chhandogya Upanishad.<sup>99</sup> Whatever bliss there is, is borrowed from the Self. "On a particle of this very bliss other beings live."<sup>100</sup> In the Bhagavata, Krishna had spoken thus: "I am always present in all beings as their soul . . . That devotion is absolute which renders a person fit to become one with Me."<sup>101</sup> There are two sets of aphorisms on devotion, one ascribed to Shandilya<sup>102</sup> and the other to Narada,<sup>103</sup> which further developed the theory of the discipline of devotion. Says Narada, "Devotion, which is really one, yet takes eleven forms: attachment to the greatness of the Lord's qualities, to His form; being engrossed in His worship, and His



thought; attachment to Him as a servant, as a friend, as a child or as toward a child, and as a beloved; surrendering oneself unto Him; seeing Him everywhere; and inability to bear the separation from Him." According to some, the ultimate goal is gaining a place in the Lord's world and precious proximity to Him. With others, all sense of dualism is lost in the final state, for the liberated attain the same form as God or become in some way absorbed in Him. But the greatness of the devotional movement lies in the fact that in yearning for God, man did not forget his brother. God's reality, in fact, becomes the bond between man and man. Says Krishna in the Bhagavata: "I am established in every being. That man of invidious perception who draws the line between himself and another, him Death pursues with his dangerous fear. Therefore, with charity and honour and with friendship towards all and a non-differentiating outlook, one should worship Me, the Soul of all beings, as enshrined in all beings. Honouring them, one should mentally bow to all the beings, realizing that the Lord has entered them with an aspect of His own being."

#### V. *The Synthesis of the Gita*

Krishna, who spoke thus in the Bhagavata, spoke with a mightier utterance in the Gita.<sup>104</sup>

The origins of the Krishna cult need not detain us long. He began as a tribal god, of the tribes of Western and Central India, like the Vrishnis, the Satvatas, the Abhiras and the Yadavas. He was at first opposed by the Vedic religion and the memory of this opposition lingers in the episode in the Krishna legends where Indra, the Vedic God, sent rain to flood Krishna's village, Gokul. But Krishna lifted up the Govardhana hill like an umbrella and the episode ended in the defeat of Indra. Krishna was absorbed into the Hindu pantheon as an incarnation. But the profoundest transformation occurred when a genius, gifted with the highest poetic sensitivity and the most penetrating intellect, used the Krishna figure for a pronouncement on nature, life and man's destiny, characterised by a lofty, integrative vision. This thinker was Vyasa and the fruit of his vision was the Gita.

Vyasa's attack was complex, many-sided. Metaphysical thought had proliferated into many systems. He did not want to add one



more when there were already too many. He sought to emphasize the points of agreement among them and thus bring about a philosophical synthesis. This philosophical synthesis was also to be a religious synthesis. For, in basic doctrine, a bridge had yet to be built between the withdrawn Absolute of the Upanishads and the personal God of the theistic movements. This also implied a shift of accent from speculative thought to practical ethics, from detachment to positive engagement. Vyasa also saw that men's temperaments differed and they started their spiritual journey from different points. Some sought certitude through the intellect. Others were troubled by the perplexities of moral life. Yet others yearned for an enriched emotional life. Vyasa wanted to show that all these could meet in the end, at the same terminal.

Vyasa accepts cues from every prior system of thought, but he adopts them for his own synthesis. He starts with the Samkhya opposition of Purusha and Prakriti, spirit and matter, God and nature, but speedily resolves the opposition. The teleological trend in the processes of nature did not seem to him to be congruent with the Samkhya assumption that nature was dead, inert, insentient. Purusha was not aloof from Prakriti, but its inner guiding spirit, the soul of the world. God is the mighty spirit, a spark of whose glory is the manifested universe. The brilliance of the sun, the moon and fire is His. He is refulgent as the sun beyond darkness.<sup>105</sup> He is the vital force that sustains all life.<sup>106</sup> He is also time, the mighty ground in which world systems originate and subside. The universe, thus, is not an illusion or phantasm. Nor is it a mechanical product of matter. It is a real and rational creation by the Supreme Intelligence. Nature is an instrument of God and it should be used as an instrument by man also, for drawing near to God.

The shift in accent should be clear now. The withdrawn, indeterminate Absolute of the Upanishads and the personal God of theism are synthesised. There is a subtle perception here which could have come only from a poet. The Upanishads had not denied the reality of the world. But there did linger an impression that the world implied a lower plane of reality, as contrasted with the unqualified Absolute. And, even after the Gita, we find Sankara contrasting the purely phenomenal reality of the world with the basic reality of Brahman. But Vyasa, the poet, could



not accept this relegation of the world, the arena of storm and stress and myriad challenges which alone could furnish man with an existential context for a self-attestation, to a lower plane. The personal God is merely a refracted image of the withdrawn Absolute in Sankara. So is it in Eckhart and Boehme. But the Supreme Self of the Gita stands higher than even the immutable Brahman, for the transcendent, withdrawn Absolute and the immanent world-soul are but aspects—and not necessarily higher and lower aspects—of the Supreme Self. At best there is only the contrast of static and dynamic aspects between the two. The world emerges from God and in fulfilment of His purpose. "All this is threaded in Me (the Divine) as pearls on a string."<sup>107</sup> The Gita also uses the Rig Vedic image of the world as a mighty tree with roots above and branches and foliage spreading below.<sup>108</sup>

Since the world is the arena of God's action, the doctrine of incarnation is furnished its clear rationale. The world is created for fulfilling God's purpose and He is its informing spirit. Historical existence, thus, is not alienation from God, but a divine scheme. There is no logical inconsistency, therefore, in the special manifestation of an incarnation in a critical context in historical existence. The identity of the doctrine with that of the prologue of the Fourth Gospel should be noted. The Logos doctrine finds its fulfilment in the incarnate Christ. God intervenes in historical existence as an Avatar or incarnation. But there is an important difference. In Christian doctrine, the incarnation is a unique event. In Vyasa, it is cyclical and recurring, for moral crises in history are also recurring. This view is probably more catholic, for it can accept the great teachers of mankind everywhere and in all epochs as messengers of God.

This catholicism of Vyasa is seen at its finest in the synthesis of the various views regarding the path of liberation. He accepts, as of equal efficacy, the ways of knowledge, devotion and work. He manages to do this because he always keeps the full, rounded image of man before him. His analysis does not make the mistake of total reduction to single dimensions. That is, even though he notices that men can be broadly classified into three types, intellectual, emotional and active, he also realises that this typology rests only on the dominance of a particular trait and should not be interpreted to mean the complete absence of the other capa-



cities. In this fuller perspective of analytical psychology, which takes care not to analyse away realities, certain traits may be dominant, but the ground pattern contains the other elements too. Thus, knowledge, when it attains the final vision, kindles into lyrical rapture, emotional fulfilment is enriched with understanding, and the life of action brings in its wake perception as well as emotional stimulation. So the paths converge. To know God is to love Him. To love Him is to know Him. And to know and love God is also to know and love humanity, because God is the unity that mediates between man and man.

The rule of the Golden Mean is the necessary preliminary to the spiritual journey, whatever the path chosen. Asceticism is condemned. "Vain and conceited men, impelled by the force of their desires and passions, subject themselves to terrible mortifications not ordained by scriptures. And, being foolish, they torture their bodily organs and Me also who dwell within the body. Know that such men are fiendish in their resolve."<sup>109</sup> Extreme indulgence is also condemned, likewise. "Some offer their senses in the fires of restraint, while others offer the objects of sense in the fires of their senses."<sup>110</sup> For the path of knowledge or Jnana Yoga, Vyasa accepts the technique of Yoga. For the practitioner of Yoga too, the starting point is the rule of the Golden Mean. "Yoga is not for him who eats too much, nor for him who eats too little. It is not for him who is given to too much sleep, nor for him who keeps too long vigils. But for the man who is temperate in his food and recreation, who is restrained in all his actions, who is regulated in his sleep and vigils, Yoga puts an end to all sorrows."<sup>111</sup> A man of disciplined mind who moves among the objects of sense with his senses fully under his control and free from bias and aversion—he attains to a clear vision."<sup>112</sup>

The Gita accepts the Vedas for the light they shed on the way of knowledge towards liberation, but there is vigorous heterodoxy in this acceptance. "Those who rejoice in the letter of the Vedas saying, 'there is naught but this'" are criticised as unintelligent and contrasted with those who "know" the Veda.<sup>113</sup> It is reaffirmed that the basic teaching of the Vedas is that man should strive to reach the Supreme Being. "That which is to be known in all the Vedas am I."<sup>114</sup> Study of the Vedas can only give initial help. For knowledge to become realisation, the higher technique of



Yogic meditation is necessary. "What use there is of a tank in a place flooded over with water, only so much in all the Vedas is the use for a knower of the Ultimate Reality, equipped with his higher knowledge."<sup>115</sup>

The final realisation through Yoga is described in exalted terms. "When one's properly controlled mind becomes steadfast within the Self alone and when one becomes free from all desires, then he is said to have accomplished Yoga." He is steadfast like an "unflickering lamp in a windless place." All sense of dualism and alienation disappears. "Seeing the Self through the Self, he finds contentment within the Self." He can now ride the storms of the world with perfect equanimity.<sup>116</sup>

At this summit, cognitive experience is also an emotional experience. "Here he finds that supreme bliss which is perceived by the intellect alone and which is beyond the reach of the sense organs." The knower cannot but be the adorer. "He who knows Me worships Me."<sup>117</sup> To know the highest truth is to lift up our hearts to the Supreme, touch Him and adore Him.<sup>118</sup> Such adoration cannot lead to withdrawal from the world. God-realisation means the realisation of the unity of all being and an ethical imperative emerges directly from the realisation. For right conduct is whatever expresses our real unity with God, man and nature. "The Yogi is he from whom the world shrinks not and who does not shrink from the world." Liberated from ego-centered distinctions, he sees the Self in others too and his ideal becomes the stability of the world.<sup>119</sup> As a poet, Vyasa could not dismiss the rich tissue of life as an illusion. As a philosopher he had established the continuity between Absolute existence and historical existence. His catholicity accepts many paths to liberation. But all sojourners should return to the responsibilities of group life.

For the masses, not equipped for difficult intellectual disciplines and with their activities confined to the humble, routine tasks of living, the path of devotion may be easier. This was the class which had been dominated most by the ritual aspect of religion. Ritual had its function in providing a mechanism for constantly reminding man about his obligations to his creator. But it had its dangers too. It could become a habit and a routine with the householder, and, manipulated by the priestly classes, it could



become the exploitation of the masses by a parasitic group. Vyasa wanted to restore to ritual its inwardness, its significance as a symbolic sacrifice, as a constant reminder that man should not live and strive for himself alone, but also his brethren and for God. Yajna or ritual means the spirit of dedication and sacrifice rather than a sacerdotal ceremony. "Even this world is not for the man without Yajna, not to speak of any other."<sup>120</sup> If the real spirit was there, ritual could also be drastically simplified. "Whoever devotedly offers to Me a leaf, a flower, a fruit or water—I accept the pious offering of that man who is pure of heart."<sup>121</sup> But this is only the first step in the path of devoted dedication. All life and action must become an offering. "Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer, whatsoever of austerities you practise—do that as an offering unto Me . . . With your mind firmly set on the way of renunciation, you shall become free and come to Me."<sup>122</sup> The devotion which dedicates the entire life to God will ultimately be rewarded with insight as well. "Fix your mind in Me, into Me let your understanding enter. You shall surely live with Me hereafter."<sup>123</sup> The stability of the world, a paramount consideration with Vyasa, is smoothly, even unconsciously, guaranteed in the life of devotion. For if all action is dedicated to God, they will cease to be motivated by ego-centered drives and social tensions must necessarily subside. Dedicated action is also altruistic action and the individual will ultimately learn to seek and find happiness in the happiness of others.

It is in outlining the path towards liberation through work that Vyasa affirms his complete acceptance of historical existence. The tendency to regard historical existence as a down-grading of—if not a total alienation from—the pure, static being of Brahman, is vigorously rejected. The Absolute as the dynamic is, if anything, on a higher level than the withdrawn, static Absolute. "Know action to originate from the Brahman and the Brahman from the Imperishable. Whoever, in this world, does not help in the rotating of the wheel thus set in motion—he is of sinful life, he indulges in mere pleasures of sense and he lives in vain. There is not for Me, in the three worlds, anything that has to be done nor anything unobtained to be obtained. And yet I continue to be engaged in action. For if ever I did not remain engaged in action unsleeping, men would in every way follow in my track.



These worlds would fall into ruin if I did not do My work. I would then be the creator of chaos and would destroy these people."<sup>124</sup> This is a magnificent affirmation that historical existence is a divine program, that the divine will is continuously active in the world and that man can align himself with God only through action. A rapid and brilliant psychological analysis shows up most doctrines of passivity as of unhealthy origination and really rationalisations of retreat from responsibility. "Whoever having restrained his organs of action still continues to brood over the objects of senses—he, the deluded one, is called a hypocrite."<sup>125</sup> This type of withdrawal merely masks repressions. Vyasa shows that there really can be no withdrawal from action. "No one, indeed, can remain, for even a single moment, unengaged in activity."<sup>126</sup> For withdrawal is a decision, commitment and therefore a deed. It is an active negation of responsibility. This flight is often masked by rationalisations. We must always be careful to analyse the motivations behind what goes by the name of renunciation. Withdrawal from action may be Tamasic, or due to ignorance and lethargy. It can be Rajasic, or due to fear of consequences such as bodily suffering.

The highest action is that which synthesises activity and real renunciation. This real renunciation consists in not being attached to the fruits of action from a purely personal and individual, ego-centered point of view. This is a heroic ideal, because it demands the undertaking of duties which may bring danger and death. It is also an altruistic ideal, for once again it is stressed that the true ideal of action for the individual is the solidarity and welfare of the world.<sup>127</sup> Disinterested action means that the individual is not motivated by narrow self-interest. It does not mean that he is to be indifferent to the interests of the world. Vyasa repudiates the abstract notion of individual claims. The best people have the largest burdens to bear. In this program, man aligns himself with God, for God also works unceasingly in the world, though He has no personal ends to gain from such action.

✓ Here we glimpse again the realisation that the aesthetic view of life is probably the highest. The Rig Veda<sup>128</sup> had referred to the Supreme Being as Poet and in the Gita, the Supreme Being again refers to Himself as Poet.<sup>129</sup> But the very important difference between this perception and the Samkhya approach should



be noted. Samkhya wanted to maintain the spirit uncontaminated by the vicissitudes of matter, of historical existence. The world then might become an aesthetic spectacle, but the absorbed identification of the witness with the drama witnessed is lacking here. Vyasa, on the other hand, imposes upon the individual the difficult, but heroic, obligation to be a participant and witness at the same time. He participates energetically in the dramatic action of the world. But he has the detachment of the aesthete, because, for one thing, he is not pursuing personal ends, and secondly because he has acquired poise, "being steadfast and unshaken by even the heaviest of storms."<sup>130</sup> Vyasa, with his genius for synthesis, reconciles the doctrine that "action is superior to non-action"<sup>131</sup> with the claims of the aesthetic outlook. His man of action is steady in the realisation which came to him only in the last clear moment of a life of outward and inward storms—that "ripeness is all."

The objective which the man of action should ever keep before him is the stability, solidarity and progress of society. Society can function properly only on the principle of the ethical interdependence of its various constituents. The social order is one of division of labour. It is significant that Krishna asserts that the constitution of this order is a divine decree. "The four classes were created by Me." It will be a most serious mistake if this is interpreted to mean that the caste hierarchy is divinely ordained. Vyasa takes the greatest care to clarify that he is not thinking of hereditary castes but of personality types. If Vyasa insists that every man must fulfil his Svadharma or his own specific social obligations and if he broadly identifies these obligations with the functional orientation of the class to which the individual belongs, he also definitely relates Svadharma to Svabhava or personality type, the complex of temperament, outlook and capacities.<sup>132</sup> Here he is trying to recover the real intention of the Rig Vedic hymn<sup>133</sup> which visualised society as a mighty person whose limbs were the important orders of society. Society in this vision is regarded as consisting of men following four broad types of pursuits: culture, politics, industry and labour. Division of labour and cooperation are the motors of progress. The Yajur Veda had said, "Where Brahman (power of the intelligentsia) and Kshatra (political power) move together in concord, that world I shall



know as one of bliss.”<sup>134</sup> Again, using the abstract terms rather than referring to castes as such, the Rig Veda had uttered this prayer: “Strengthen the power of knowledge and strengthen minds. Strengthen the ruling power and strengthen heroes. Give strength to the milch-cow and strengthen the people.”<sup>135</sup> Functions necessarily differ between individuals because capacities and the entire pattern of the structure of personalities differ. But by relating duties (Svadharmā) to the specific pattern of personal capacities (Svabhāva), Vyasa once again revealed the fine catholicity of his mind, for he affirmed that the faithful discharge of one’s duties, be they ever so humble, would lead to liberation. “He from whom all beings proceed and by whom all this is pervaded—by worshipping Him through the performance of his duty does man attain perfection.”<sup>136</sup> Here Indian thought completes a perfect circle, for the adventure into the transcendent converges to the same terminal as the engagement with social reality. The metaphysical thought of the philosophers emerges as in perfect concord with the ethical thought of the writers of the Dharma Sastra. The world is not an alienation from God, but a way to God, for it is the arena of active, moral life, which is really an alignment with God’s action in the world.

The Gita is in the form of a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. Indian thought at least has accepted it as a dialogue between Nara and Narayana, Man and God. It is the timeless dialogue that takes place in the recess of every soul in every epoch. But it is very important to remember that this dialogue is an episode in a vast epic, the Maha Bharata. It is a strictly functional episode, for it takes place at a central crisis of the epic action. The whole epic moves irresistibly to the great war between the righteous Pandavas and their unrighteous cousins, the Kurus. In the battlefield, Arjuna, the Pandava hero, experiences a profound crisis of spirit. He begins to wonder what use an empire would be if it is to be won by bloodshed, by lifting arms against one’s own kinsfolk. It is at this critical moment that a profound transformation takes place in the narrative. A pinnacle of thought has to be ascended towards an integrative world-vision, because the highest insight is needed to take the decision, here and now, to fight or not to fight. Arjuna’s chariot of war suddenly becomes a cell of meditation, the scene of an interior dialogue. He



is the tormented human soul and Krishna is the soul's charioteer, God. The only religious figure to select the battlefield as the venue for spiritual instruction, Krishna thereby clearly indicated that the crisis of action was an existential crisis which could be resolved only by profoundly moral decisions. Arjuna was told that he was not fighting for an empire for himself and his brothers, but was called upon to fulfil his duty as a warrior, which was to resist evil, irrespective of what the ultimate consequences might be. When the realisation dawns on Arjuna, the thunder of the battlefield, which was stilled during the interior dialogue, once again storms into consciousness like a peremptory call of the world demanding immediate attention to its crisis, and the epic action is resumed.

There is a profound significance in this welding of metaphysical thought as a functional element in the structure of an aesthetic presentation. Analytical thought had already covered a great distance, in the ethical thought of the Dharma Sastras and the metaphysical speculations of the Upanishads. It was now time for a third approach, the aesthetic. The creative vision of art had to contemplate the plenitude of life, with its myriad types of men and its mesh of events and see whether the aesthetic world-view harmonised with the vision gained through the analytical thought of ethics and metaphysics. Art works with the material of historical existence and this great adventure of aesthetic creativity yielded two crowning achievements, the epic histories, Ramayana and Maha Bharata.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

## Epic Histories

I. *The Ramayana*

It is usual to classify the literature that arose after the Vedic period closed as Epic History or Itihasa, Epic Legends or Puranas and Epic Poems or Kavyas. But they are all primarily the product of poetic creativity. The epics are supposed to be historical, but whatever factual elements they may have are elaborated into genuine aesthetic creations and as pure poetry they are the source and inspiring model of the subsequent Kavyas (epic poems). Likewise, the Puranas reach their heights only when the literary sensibility inspires them. Elsewhere, they become prosaic narration. But the classification is very convenient for organising the material of a narrative literary history like the present work.

The narrative elements in Vedic literature, many of them in dialogue form, like the story of Urvasi or the account of the battle between Sudas and the Bharatas, foreshadow the narrative manner of the epics. When a chieftain conducted a ritual or offered gifts, he and his race were praised in song by both priest and bard. Stories of gods and heroes were also narrated on such auspicious occasions. The Sambhava Parva or Section of the Origins, the first chapter of the Maha Bharata, traces the genealogy of the heroes back to their ancestors who were descended from the gods and gives many interesting stories about the old kings. On the occasion of the great horse sacrifice, which marked the accession of a prince to imperial status, a Brahmin recited by day and a Rajanya (man of noble rank) by night legends about gods, the ancestors of the prince and his own martial exploits.<sup>1</sup> The song was accompanied on a string instrument, the Vina. In course of time a hereditary class of bards or Sutas arose. In the Maha Bharata, the bard, Sauti, says: "This legend is very old. It was narrated by Vyasa to the dwellers of the Naimisha forest. My father, Roma Harshana (literally, the man who makes your hairs stand erect by his gripping narration) was first trained to recite it, and I shall narrate it just as I have learnt it from my



father." The growth of this specialised class helped the coalescence of the stories into regular cycles. A rich material was thus available for creating a poetic organism of the highest quality, if a man of genius were to appear on the scene. The first genius who thus appeared to create the epic form was Valmiki, who gave to the world one of its greatest classics, the Ramayana.<sup>2</sup>

The date of the Ramayana cannot be regarded as a closed question even now. The ancient Buddhist texts of the Tipitaka show no knowledge of the Ramayana, but do contain certain traces of ballads in which the Rama legend was sung. It is probable that the original Ramayana was composed by Valmiki in the third century B.C. on the basis of ancient ballads.<sup>3</sup> It is conjectured, however, that the work reached its present extent and contents only towards the close of the second century A.D. Book I which gives a summary of the whole epic and Book VII which continues the story after Rama's triumphant return from the battle of Lanka are believed to be later additions to the original poem. But this view can in no way be regarded as unanimously accepted. Further, it is generally agreed that interpolations were far less numerous and far less significant in the case of the Ramayana as compared to the Maha Bharata. Time has been generally gracious in preserving the unity which Valmiki gave to the work when he shaped an epic out of ballad material.

This unity was not something obtained by merely organising episodes into a well-knit sequence. Ballad material underwent a creative mutation in the hands of Valmiki and blossomed into a perfect aesthetic creation. The episode about how the poem arose is no mere anecdote, but a profound parable of the creative process. The incident runs thus: When the sage once went out into the forest in search of firewood and grass for his daily sacrificial ritual, he saw a happy pair of Krauncha birds on the branch of a tree. Suddenly, the male bird is shot dead by a hunter's arrow and the female bird utters a cry of anguish and terror. A spontaneous utterance wells up from the poet's heart and emerges from his lips, condemning this terrible crime.<sup>4</sup> Immediately after he speaks, he notices that the flow of spontaneous expression had a perfect rhythm and melody. He ponders on this miracle and through deep introspection and analysis of the state of his mind at the time of its utterance, he discovers for this profound mystery



of the unconscious creative process a solution which he gives out to his pupils in these words: "That which proceeded from me who was overpowered by sorrow could be nothing but poetry or rhythmic expression."<sup>5</sup> Ananda Vardhana, one of the most brilliant aestheticians of a later age, rightly saw in this significant episode the embryonic form of the Rasa theory according to which emotive experience is the soul, the fundamental basis and inspiration of the rhythmic expression that is poetry.<sup>6</sup>

But Ananda Vardhana also saw in this detail in the poem the revelation of Valmiki as a critic. Art is not pure spontaneity or lyricism. Conscious thought unites with spontaneous emotion and the unconscious activity of inspiration triggered by the emotion, to give form to mood, body to feeling, plot and structure to emotion. The introspective power of Valmiki, which made him analyse the unconscious link between stirred sensibility and rhythmic expression, led him to think further on the problem of finding objective correlatives, creating the aesthetic form, building up an organic complex where a logically connected sequence of episodes would at once give body to emotion and make it meaningful. And thus he proceeds to a definition of the highest poetry, which recognises all its complex demands on the creative spirit.<sup>7</sup> The language should be grammatically flawless, intelligible to scholar and layman. The narration should be in stanzas of spacious metres, flawless in phonetic structure. Above all, it should be limpidly clear, communicating its meaning the instant one heard it, and musical like a melody on strings. It should deal with the idealised man because it seeks to make man move nearer to the ideal. It should be inspired by a lofty vision. This vision takes in all the values of human life but recognises a hierarchy among them. It should give its due place to the satisfaction of sensuous but legitimate impulses, to Eros. But the dominant accent should always be on man as a moral being, on moral responsibility, on the dignity which man gains when he accepts the obligations implicit in an ideal character. Valmiki has no patience with the doctrine of art for art's sake, for there art does not look up from an unrelated sequence of pleasurable experience to an integrated vision of life where a higher pleasure may emerge from an acceptance of pain, of the tragic. That doctrine has, however, one positive virtue. It rightly insists that art has its own valid criteria



of form and these cannot be neglected, whatever be the quality of the teaching embodied in art. Valmiki accepts this fully in his definition of the formal requirements of the best poetry. But what he is not prepared to surrender is the right to regard life as the basis, inspiration and justification of art, the right to look up from art to life so that when the glance returns it can see and embody the meaning of life in art.

He proceeds to emphasise that the epic form should contain the widest range of emotional experience. Thus, after the recognition of the formal requirements of art, we return to its fundamental basis, emotion. The emotion is now embedded in the structure of a story. Valmiki welded together several elements to structure this story. At least two legends were blended together, the court intrigues of Ayodhya and the legend of Rama's war on Ravana for the abduction of Sita. If a third element—a nature myth—is present, it is a mere memory lingering in details and has little functional significance in the story as finally shaped. In the Rig Veda, Sita is the furrow of the ploughed field personified and invoked as a goddess and she is the wife of Indra, god of rain who fertilises the furrow. Memories of the legend linger in certain details of the story. Janaka came across the infant Sita in a furrow and at the end of the epic, Sita disappears underground in the arms of the goddess Earth. Rama's fight with Ravana recalls Indra's fight with Vritra and the fact that Ravana's son is called Indrajit or the conqueror of Indra is significant. Indra was aided by the Maruts or wind storms and Rama's lieutenant is Hanuman, the son of Wind.

It was the tragic cry uttered by the bird when it was separated from its mate by the cruel blow of destiny that first stirred the poet's heart. And this episode, of parting and separation, lives on as the core of the story, in numerous transformations, like a poignant theme whose recurrence in varied forms links together the vast spread of a Beethoven symphony as an organic unity. Let us follow this thematic linkage in a rapid survey. King Dasaratha of Ayodhya is childless, though he has three queens. At last, as a result of prayer and sacrifices, he gets four sons. Rama is born to Kausalya, Bharata to Kaikeyi and Lakshmana and Satrugna to Sumitra. Dasaratha was a great hunter. One day, while out hunting in the forest, he hears a sound from the



river which he interprets as that of an elephant drinking water and sends an arrow in that direction. But it was really the sound of a young man filling his pitcher with water. He is the son of an old couple, who are both blind and utterly helpless without him. The king carries the dead boy to the parents. Hearing his steps, the old ascetic thinks that it is his son coming back and chides him because he thinks the boy was sporting in the water and returning leisurely. When the cruel truth is at last out, the old couple find the separation unbearable and leave the world. The heart-broken ascetic curses the king before his death. The king too shall die of the sorrow of separation from his son.

Years later, Dasaratha decides to crown Rama as the heir-apparent. But an old woman, Manthara, intrigues with Kaikeyi and, prompted by her, Kaikeyi demands that her son, Bharata, should be nominated as the heir and Rama should be exiled for fourteen years. Dasaratha cannot refuse the demand because, once in the past, he had promised her two boons. The tortured king thinks of desperate remedies. He asks Rama to kill him so that his obligation to Kaikeyi will lapse with his death. But Rama decides to go to the forest to shield the honour of his father who had given his word. Lakshmana and Rama's bride Sita decide to go with him. Yet another scene, full of emotional tension, is created when Sumantra, the aged minister, begins to drive away the chariot with the two brothers and Sita. Dasaratha cries out in the poignancy of his grief, "Stop! Stop!" and Rama cries out in a state of high emotional tension to end the unhappy but inevitable parting scene, "Go! Go!" Dasaratha does not survive the separation.

The wail of the stricken bird is silenced for a while when Rama and Sita wander through the forests enjoying their calm solitudes and the entrancing loveliness of hill and plain. But it breaks out in the anguished lament of Rama when he returns to his hut one day to find that Sita has been carried away by Ravana, the warrior-king of Lanka. Strenuous preparation and the final battle follow. Rama and Sita return to Ayodhya and there is an interval of happiness. But destiny is preparing for its final blow. The citizens whisper calumny about a queen who was in the power of Ravana in Lanka and Rama feels that he has no choice but to abandon a wife who is unacceptable to his subjects, even



though it will break his heart. Lakshmana has to fulfil the cruel order to take her and leave her on the banks of the Ganges. This separation from one whom he had revered as a mother is the most tragic experience of Lakshmana's life.

The lament of the abandoned Sita is heard by the self-same poet whose heart was stirred by the cry of the bird. Sita is taken under his shelter. She gives birth to two sons, Lava and Kusa. Involvement in the tragic is pain. But holding it at arm's length, contemplating it, aesthetically shaping it, is to transform it, to invest the merely painful with the dignity and purifying power of the tragic. So Valmiki composes his great epic poem out of the sequence of incidents so far and Lava and Kusa recite this poem like young bards from the hermitage at the great imperial sacrifice of Rama. There is a short-lived reunion. But this time, the ground opens and goddess Earth, the mother of Sita, takes her away from an existence which had offered the brimming cup of suffering again and again. This last separation numbs the life of Rama. Time goes by and at last brings the blows that round off the tale. Due to no fault of either, Rama and Lakshmana are separated and finally Rama's own life draws to its dusk.

There are subtle variations of the recurring theme. Bharata worshipped Rama and the intrigue of his mother, meant really to benefit him, separates him from his idol. Kaikeyi's demands are met, but it brings about the separation of widowhood, for Dasaratha does not survive after meeting her terrible demand. It also brings about the alienation of her son from her. Kaikeyi and Bharata may be together, but there is a gulf between them. On the other hand, Kausalya's heart is with her son. But, unlike Dasaratha whom abrupt death relieved of all pain, she has to live through long years of separation. We are apt to forget this sorrowing mother, alone with her lonely thoughts, back in Ayodhya. But we are reminded of her with supreme artistry by the poet. As a prisoner in Lanka, Sita thinks of her. "I do not grieve so much for Rama or Lakshmana as I do for the grief-stricken mother-in-law of mine who is ever thinking of the promised return of all of us from the forests."<sup>8</sup> This fond reminiscence by a daughter-in-law indirectly sheds light on the graciousness of both Kausalya and Sita. There are, again, laments of separation which do not reach our ear. Thus Urmila, the wife of Lakshmana,



had to part with him for fourteen years because he decided to accompany his brother into exile. There are psychological alienations, in the enemy camp. Mandodari, the consort of Ravana, is as chaste and noble a woman as Sita. But there is a gulf between her and her husband.

The orchestration of the whole epic around the recurring theme of parting and separation shows right from the outset that Valmiki has a profoundly serious approach towards life and is determined to confront squarely the problem of the tragic in human destiny. To use an expression that is rapidly becoming a cliché, his is an existentialist approach. "Like waters that have ebbed away, Time's flow will also never return."<sup>9</sup> When Bharata goes after Rama into the forest to persuade him to come back and to tell him of the death of their father, Rama, with a profound sympathy, realises that the boy must be tormented with unconscious feelings of guilt, since it was the demand of his mother, meant obviously to benefit him, that hastened the death of Dasaratha. Therefore, it is to the task of consoling Bharata that Rama first addresses himself. This also gives him an occasion to expound his profoundly serious view of life where, if tragedy is accepted, courage is insisted upon.<sup>10</sup> "Man cannot do as he pleases. He is not wholly his own master. Fate drags him hither and thither. All acquisition ends in loss, all rise in fall, all union in separation, all life in death. Bodies become infirm by age like mansions. Night passes like a flood and returns not. Man forgets death in the exultation of living. But death is man's shadow, sitting with him when he sits down, walking with him when he walks, hastening with him when he accelerates his pace, lying by his side when he lies down. Every sunrise and every fresh season we greet take away a part of our life. Beings come together and separate in life like logs of driftwood on the sea. One cannot wait for another, even as a caravan cannot stop for a wayfarer. Our father has lived a righteous life and has attained heaven. We need not grieve over him because he has laid down here his decrepit body. Wise and firm men ought not to grieve."

If the mood is sombre here, the indication is not that life is a closed fatality or a casual drift where human freedom is an illusion. This is made clear beyond the shadow of ambiguity by a scene that follows immediately. The sage Jabali was listening



to the advice given by Rama to Bharata and also to his final answer that he was not returning to Ayodhya. He tries to turn Rama's own arguments against his decision and as a basis for a philosophy of hedonism.<sup>11</sup> If beings meet and part like driftwood, "he who thinks, 'this is my father', 'this is my mother' and becomes attached to this relationship is without sense ... Dasaratha is nought to thee as thou to him." Why then be bound to a promise given to Dasaratha or by the latter's promise to Kaikeyi? "O Rama, be wise. There exists no world but this, that is certain. Enjoy that which is present and abandon that which is unpleasant. Adopting this universally valid principle, receive the kingdom offered thee by Bharata."

Rama's reply shows that he believes that the man of high ideals can and should create meaning even if it be that life lacks meaning in itself. In the last analysis, life is not obedience to exterior command, but a self-attestation. "It is his conduct that renders man virtuous, a coward or a hero, and transmutes impurity into purity. The self in our heart is the witness of all our good and bad thoughts and words and deeds. With my five senses contented, I lead my life in this world, without deceit, with faith in values and with competence to distinguish right and wrong ... The sea will overflow its shores before I transgress a promise given to my father."

There is another dimension to this profound problem which the poet sees in all its clarity but allows his characters to perceive only as a vague intuition, because, as living characters, they are involved in their actions and their vision is normally limited to the immediate horizon of this field of action. Whether events are a casual drift or form a processional movement towards a fulfilment can be decided only when we can pursue the consequences of an action to its distant, long-term effects. The whole epic is always steadily moving towards the ridding of the earth of Ravana. Manthara's intrigue and Kaikeyi's self-centeredness all help ultimately in this movement. That is why, while comforting Bharata, Rama feels that behind Kaikeyi's selfishness are the will and purpose of God. With an astonishing objectivity he even feels that Kaikeyi will be let down if he now returns to Ayodhya after having consented to exile. "When I pledged my word in the presence of my father to enter the forest, Queen Kaikeyi was



rendered glad at heart. How should I now give her cause for distress?" The only solution in the difficult problems of moral choice is to be true to oneself, accept the tragic, if tragedy is one's lot, and have the faith that a purpose vaster than the individual is being fulfilled through the instrumentality of individual destiny. This is totally different from resignation. For one must accept his task not with resignation, but with enthusiasm. "A man must set about his duties and good works in a spirit of joy and purity of heart, with faith and clear vision of right and wrong. We must go forward in life in a spirit of truth, righteousness, kindness, sweet spokenness and reverence." Basic to this attitude is the belief that the righteous man is an ally of God, that, in one sense, right intention itself is the result of grace, and in another, it is a dedicated furtherance of God's purpose through man's volition. It is significant that when Hanuman meets Sita in her captivity, after making many enquiries, she expresses the hope that Rama constantly prays to the gods for their blessing and realises that his own endeavour is really a blessing of God.

After isolating the lofty ideal of the epic by analysis, we must return to the recognition that there is no bald philosophising anywhere and that the ideal is embedded in a rich poetic tissue. Valmiki is primarily an artist, though he happens to have a profound philosophy of life. The episode of Bharata's pursuit of Rama to request him to return has an organic function in the narrative for if Rama had any lingering regret about having left the kingdom he is given an opportunity for another choice. Being human persons involved in their destiny and not detached philosophers, the characters do not present a rigid, unbending front, fortified by philosophy, to the flood of events. Sita sympathises with Rama's ideals and intuitively understands his position. But she also weakens at times. In the Dandaka forest, Rama is called upon to protect the ascetics from the ravages of the demons. If kingship was lost, there was some compensation in the tranquil life of the forests. But the arduous responsibility of kingship, protecting the weak from aggression, seems to pursue them without any of its benefits. So she remonstrates, though gently: "The duties of kingship go with actual status. Dressed in garments of bark and with hair matted, you are now an ascetic, pure and simple. Of course, you know best. I am only asking



you to think well before undertaking anything." Rama knows and chooses the best. But he too, in his turn, is human and when Sita is lost, he is so overwhelmed by sorrow that Lakshmana has to remind him of his own lessons about facing the tragic vicissitudes of life courageously. The characters of Valmiki are not abstractions, but human beings reacting sensitively to the tranquil or angry currents of life.

But these human beings do represent a moralized civilisation which, in the epic, is brought into confrontation with another culture given over to quite different ideals. There are ample indications of advanced material development in Ayodhya. But essentially it is an idealistic culture where material development and intellectual power are moralized and subordinated to the needs of purity of temperament and delicate ideality of action. Lanka, on the other hand, represents the extreme development of a sensate culture. It is the confrontation of the individuals, Rama and Ravana, that gives a concentration to the epic action. But we should not miss the extension in depth of this polarization. The two polities, Ayodhya and Lanka, have grown up on the basis of different traditions. We get the impression that Ayodhya is a mainly agricultural community where the strife is between man and soil or the jungle which needs to be cleared. When Bharata comes to persuade Rama to go back, the latter, who has decided to continue in exile, makes many enquiries about the state of the land. "Depending on tanks for their water supply, freed from all fears of wild animals and unrighteous men, do not the provinces remain happy and contented?"<sup>12</sup> He enquires whether the agriculturists and cattle rearers are doing well, whether the traders are flourishing and whether the income exceeds the expenditure. But this does not mean that Ayodhya is a pastoral backwater. It is a polity and it also needs an army. And the statesman has to be aware of the problems of morale. "Dost thou not," Rama asks Bharata, "at the proper time grant thy soldiers what thou shouldst, namely provision and pay? Remember that if the proper time for these be passed, they get angry and great is the evil that springs therefrom."<sup>13</sup> This shows again that Valmiki's idealism never falls a prey to the tendency towards thin abstractions. The hard realities of life are recognised, but they are plastically moulded to realise the ideal. In Lanka we find a predatory state, where



the army is not meant for law and order or defence, but for aggression. Prosperity here does not emerge from productive effort, from income from work exceeding expenditure, but from aggressive onslaught against other communities and tributes exacted. In material splendour, Lanka surpasses Ayodhya. Hanuman is dazzled by its wealth. But there seems to be nothing there to divert the mind from the outward to the inward riches. In Ayodhya, the forest, where the sages dwelt, and the town and village were closely interlinked and the purifying stream of a higher life was always flowing into secular society from the hermitage.

✓ In the political system also we see this contrast. Ayodhya is a monarchy, but it is a constitutional monarchy. At every stage, the king consults the council of elders and the assembly of the people. When Dasaratha thinks of making Rama the heir-apparent, he addresses the gathering of citizens. "If what I have proposed is proper and is to your liking, do you accord approval to it, and advise me as to what else I am to do and in what manner."<sup>14</sup> And in the final movement of the epic, Rama has to abandon Sita because she has become unacceptable to the people. Although the populace here shows itself as cruelly fickle, its wish is sovereign. But in Ravana's council we see only the inflated egoism of a despot surrounded by flatterers. The advice given by a sane few like Malayavan, the maternal grandsire, and Vibhishana, the brother, of Ravana are hotly resented and summarily rejected. The supreme egoist recognises him only as the wise man who gives advice that rationalises his own impulses. His uncle Mareecha tries to dissuade him, gives it up as a hopeless task and agrees to do his bidding. Ravana then tells him, "Now you are the real Mareecha of old, valorous and wise. When you did not see my point, you were a dull-witted demon."<sup>15</sup>

And thus the confrontation of two ways of living unfolds in the confrontation of Rama and Ravana in a stream of narrative, enlivened with episodes, peopled with a world of thronging characters. But there is no contrast of black and white between the opposed characters. Valmiki's imagination is too mature to land into that type of naiveté and his sympathy too profound to miss the nobility that lingers even in the worst of men. Ravana is no wicked monster. He is learned, sensitive to beauty, endowed with tremendous energy. But his is the tragedy of the superman who



has embraced the wrong ideal. He thinks self-attestation lies in following one's impulses and bending the resisting external world to their demands. He does not realize till it is too late that the self is thereby enslaved rather than liberated.

When at last the consequences of his actions catch up with him and Mandodari, his queen, contemplates his lifeless body lying in the field, through a veil of tears, her grief-stricken heart glimpses the tragic flaw in the character of the man who should have been nearest to her but was farthest in spirit. Death, which impatiently obliterates the distinction between the queen and the soldier's wife, has forced her to come out of the palace into the battle-field and throw away her veil. She is now just a bereaved woman lamenting her husband, not the queen of Lanka. In life, he had been alienated from her. Death seems to prolong this alienation. "The earth is your beloved today, not I. For you speak no word to me and lie there embracing the earth."<sup>16</sup> Memories throng back, of the unclouded days when, as a new bride, she was near and dear to him, of the later entanglement with destiny. The hero may be pardoned aggressive violence, but she remembers that it was by deceit that Ravana stole Sita. And now she glimpses the central flaw in Ravana's character. Ravana had begun his career as world-conqueror as an ascetic. His enormous energy had turned inward and he had practised the severest austerities, subjugated his impulses with the thoroughness with which he later annihilated enemies in war. "You conquered your sensuous impulses, practised the severest austerities and conquered the world. But the vanquished impulses were waiting for an opportunity to return to the offensive. They won when desire for Sita overwhelmed you and this is the end of it all."<sup>17</sup> The tragic flaw in Ravana was his egoism and the identification of his self with his impulses. He showed himself capable of the most astonishing self-discipline but he practised it for winning the boon of irresistible might from the gods so that the world would not be able to resist the demands of his lust. His was a case of remarkable inversion, of the highest powers of the personality being made the instruments for the satisfaction of the lowest. But, just before his death, he also grows in moral stature. And it is significant that it is tragedy that shocks him into growth. When his brother Kumbhakarna dies and later, when he has to face the



unbearably tragic loss of his heroic son, Indrajit, he profoundly regrets not having heeded the advice of his brother Vibhishana.

A community that lives solely by predatory aggression regresses to the level of the primitive tribe, whatever be its advance in a purely material culture. The moral dilemma that faces such a group is this. The in-group sentiment is strong and in one sense it is a socialising factor, for it helps the individual to identify himself with a larger entity, the social group. But it also inhibits positive action towards self-correction. The whole group plunges after the wrong road taken by the leader. Disassociation from him is felt to be disloyalty to the group. For the individual in such a group is strongly conditioned by tribal sentiment and lacks the wider horizon that will enable him to see that moral decisions have to be taken if the group itself is to evolve. Valmiki builds up the characters around Ravana in the light of this psychological understanding, which means that he is not prepared to present a phalanx of demons, painted in unrelieved black, ranged against Rama. And it is surprising what a rich individualisation he manages. In the lowest phase of the possible moral evolution we have Kumbhakarna. He is a giant, but a lethargic giant, whose greatest happiness is in slothful sleep. Valmiki relaxes into the boisterous humour of folk-lore when he describes the attempts to wake up this giant when the war drums sound. He was lying there, with his formidable, cavernous mouth open, into which the soldiers cast the enormous quantities of food brought by them. They then started to blow conches, beat drums and to shout. When these had no effect, they struck him with all the weapons they could lay hands on. In desperation they race elephants and horses over his chest. The giant brushes them away as if they were mosquitoes.<sup>18</sup> Always tormented by an insatiate appetite, he finds the simplest way of disposing of the monkey-soldiers of Rama is to gobble them up. But many of them come out safely through his cavernous nostrils and ears. Lakshmana challenges him. The giant disdains to fight a mere boy, but is genuinely pleased with the youngster's pluck. It is impossible not to like this simple-hearted Titan. He is forthright in his criticism of Ravana. "All this that thou hast done is not worthy of thee. If thou hadst at the outset consulted us in the matter, we would have done what was proper and dissuaded thee. By luck it is that Rama hath



not yet slain thee who hast done this tremendous wrong without serious reflection."<sup>19</sup> But there is no question of a break with the leader. Kumbhakarna accepts that he has to stand or fall with his group and goes to his death.

Indrajit shows both an advance and a regression in psychological evolution. There is an advance because he is far more alert, intelligent and subtle than Kumbhakarna. But there is a regression because the intellect, which should lift him to a wider horizon of understanding, is used to rationalise his commitment. He is the prototype of the intellectual of today, who finds complex theories and reasons to justify what are really inherited attitudes, unconscious determinations. The simpler mind of Kumbhakarna condemns what Ravana had done, though his loyalty is committed. Indrajit unconsciously identifies himself with his father and finds reasons to justify this identification. His stormy attack of Vibhishana brings this out. Vibhishana to him is a deserter who has betrayed the people with whom he grew up and joined the ranks of the enemy. He condemns this desertion as immoral, contemptible, treacherous. The stranger is ever a stranger. Right or wrong, one's group has sovereign right to one's loyalty.<sup>20</sup>

Vibhishana's dilemma is agonising. But he makes the right choice by choosing the right and the just. He had given wise counsel to Ravana, but it was brushed aside with contempt. He feels that instead of his deserting Ravana, it was his brother who had deserted him. He condemns Indrajit for defending an immoral person even if he be his father. He reaches beyond the tribal sentiment to a basic humanity.

With the poet, Rama also sees the elements of nobility in Ravana's character and that perception makes him still more noble in our eyes. At this point it is Vibhishana who has fallen from his high ideal. For he demurs at giving the proper obsequies to Ravana who was responsible for so much cruelty. But Rama says: "Though unjust, this warrior was ever energetic, valiant and courageous in battle. It is said that even the gods were not able to overcome him. He was magnanimous and powerful, this oppressor of the worlds. All enmities stop at death. Our purpose is fulfilled. Let his funeral rites be performed. He is to me also what he is to you."<sup>21</sup>

Valmiki does not make even Rama infallible. He permits the



occasional lapse that in fact brings out in relief the sustained moral integrity of the long-term tenor of life, preferring it to the inhuman abstraction of rigid perfectionism. It is significant that in his counsel to Bharata, Rama reveals himself as a statesman who can use men of different temperaments for purposes valid in the long run. He advises that virtuous men should be utilised for ideal functions, ordinary men for ordinary purposes and the inferior types for unpleasant but unavoidable needs. In the war against Ravana he needed an ally. He sides with Sugriva and ambushes the latter's brother and rival, Bali, thus enabling Sugriva to become king. Bali was guilty of certain serious transgressions and perhaps merited his fate. However, only the orthodox, who insist on confusing literature with theology, have been able to defend Rama wholly for the killing of Bali. But it is also true that the objective of defeating the world-tyrant was made nearer realisation by this alliance.

But the supremely human defection is when the war is over. Sita hears terrible words from her lord and liberator. "Know, Sita, the war I waged was not for you, but to retrieve my name and that of my family. Therefore, with my leave, go as you please, anywhere. I have no need of you. What self-respecting man, born of a high family, will take back a woman who has lived in another's house?"<sup>22</sup> Orthodox criticism, again in search of the infallible incarnation, has been completely misled in the interpretation of these sombre words. It is true that Rama later says that his rejection was to prompt the fire ordeal, through which Sita comes unhurt, so that the world may clearly see that Sita is inviolate. It is even very likely that Rama himself came to believe, in retrospect, that this was his motive. But Valmiki here sees the depths of the tormented human heart far more clearly than it is ever capable of seeing them. The fire-ordeal was meant not only to cleanse Sita in the eyes of the world, but to exorcise his own tormented fears which Rama would not have admitted. The language and idiom show a harshness which is justified only because they reveal the break-through of troubled fantasies. "Will the excitable demon have been able to restrain himself when he saw your beauty day after day?" Surely, Rama was not arguing the case of a sceptical world by proxy here. His own unconscious fears were coming to the surface. If the psychological complexity



of this critical moment is still not clear, look at the subtle imagery, which Valmiki causes to well forth from Rama. "When you, whose chastity is overcast by the shadow of misgiving, stand near me, it offends my eye even as a lamp to a man of sore eyes." Valmiki indicates by this subtle image that though Sita has remained pure, it is Rama who is afflicted by a deep malaise. The symptom is morbid; but it is localised as due to an agonising, unconscious conflict. It has no enduring reality in the structure of the personality as a whole. The profound nostalgia of Rama, his yearning for the absent Sita and later, the tenderness of the reunion, unmistakably show that Rama had never ceased passionately loving her. There is only one parallel to this profound study of human weakness in the whole of literature: the flight of Hector in the battle-field before Achilles. It is a simple fear, undisguised. Yet one feels that the man who flees is essentially a brave man. We feel the intensity of the experience of the conquered and forgive the lapse in the hour when the final doom has arrived, remembering only the nobility and heroism of Hector's general tenor of life. Likewise, Rama comes nearer to us, well-intentioned, essentially noble but weak human beings, in this tormented moment. We see him as profoundly human, not rigidly infallible and unbelievably noble. Incidentally, this is the significant difference between the more mature psychology of the classical mind and the aberrant creations that have fed on psychoanalytical theories. The latter is swept off its feet by its discovery of the unconscious and would reduce the conscious personality as a thin veneer over the unconscious. Classicism knows all about the unconscious, but it does not fall into the trap of reductionism.

Even Sita, who remains one of the purest feminine characters in all literature, is not exempted from failings, which indeed make her all the more human. When Ravana sends Mareecha, disguised as a golden deer, and she requests Rama to capture it for her, Rama chases it and when finally shot down, Mareecha cries out "Sita! Lakshmana!" in the voice of Rama. Feeling that Rama is in some great danger, Sita asks Lakshmana to go to his rescue. But Lakshmana is reluctant to leave her unprotected. In her tormented anxiety she accuses him of coveting her and desiring the death of Rama.<sup>23</sup> Punishment follows immediately, because the moment Lakshmana leaves, Ravana appears on the



scene. Later, in the moment of liberation, she is as deeply hurt by Rama's words as Lakshmana was hurt by her own words. Nevertheless, she remains an unforgettable character of radiant purity, profound devotion. The benediction of Janaka, her foster-father, at her marriage was that she should be as constantly with Rama as his shadow and she rejects the palace of Ayodhya for a hut in the forest when Rama is sent on exile. Destiny was very cruel to her. When abandoned on the banks of the Ganges, she is tempted to end her life in the cool waters of the river. But she recognises that she has to be reconciled to living because she carries within her the seed of Rama's line.

Almost the equal of Rama in nobility is Bharata. Perhaps his trials were severer, for everyone suspects his motives while Rama's suffering is lightened somewhat by universal sympathy. When he meets Rama's mother Kausalya, she, tormented by her own sorrow, taunts him with the benediction that he may enjoy his kingdom and leave her son in peace in the forest. When he begins to speak, Kausalya realises the injustice done to him and makes amends by gathering him to her heart. But his trials do not end. Guha, the tribal chieftain, and the sage Bharadvaja, have misgivings when he goes in pursuit of Rama. They think he is after Rama to dispose of him so that there will not be any possibility of his return even after fourteen years to claim the kingdom. But what he does is to take back the sandals of Rama, enthrone them and reign as their regent. How sombre was the cloud of suspicion enveloping him is clear from the fact that, after the period of exile, even Rama is not certain that he will be willing to surrender the kingdom after reigning so long. So Rama sends Hanuman in advance to make discreet enquiries. Conceived in depth, the characters of Valmiki are fully transparent only to their creator. And an episode like this of Rama himself feeling uncertain about Bharata only serves to heighten the nobility of the latter's personality.

Lakshmana is capable of intense dedication, but he is impulsive and often jumps to conclusions. When he sees Bharata and his retinue moving near to them, he is certain that the latter's intention is sinister. Rama reassures the excited young man with gentle mockery. His nature has the complexity of deep, genuine loyalties. Thus, though he insists on following his brother into



exile, he is satisfied that Rama's renunciation of the kingdom was a serious mistake. "We cut at the very root of our Dharma (the code of the warrior) when we gave up the kingdom. He who possesses wealth and prosperity is surrounded by friends and relations. He is credited with learning. His prowess is applauded. He is the wise man. He is possessed of all virtues. The world is for him and not for us."<sup>24</sup> The dramatic subtlety of all such utterance lies in the fact that Lakshmana himself does not believe in them deep in his heart. His is a young, generous nature that rebels against the apparent waywardness of the world which grants success to evil and intrigue and brings suffering to the good, when he sees the afflictions of the brother whom he loves and worships. But we feel in our hearts that if Lakshmana had been in the place of Rama, his choice would have been the same. His boyish, sensitive temperament can put up with any amount of trouble when it is he who is asked to bear it. What upsets him is the spectacle of his hero suffering.

Hanuman too is a memorable character. He is as devoted to Rama as Lakshmana, but he is far more mature. When Vibhishana leaves Ravana and comes over to Rama's side, Sugriva and the other army commanders are not sure that he is not really a spy and want to test him thoroughly. But the wise Hanuman gives this advice: "I think this is just the time when he should come. Sudden interrogation is wrong. A man in his situation may take offence and a proffered friendship may be lost. One's inner intention is not such an easy thing to find out. His words do not seem to suggest any bad design. His face is clear. I entertain no suspicion about him."<sup>25</sup>

It is impossible to analyse all the characters here. But we have seen enough of Valmiki's powers of characterisation in depth and his profound understanding of human nature which can create generous sympathy for ideals without being blind to flaws. Let us now pass on to the narrative power of the poet. Here again, only a few representative illustrations can be given. narrative power

For the full visualisation of the narrative stream, for its episodic richness, the poet has to use numerous details. But he has to remember all of them vividly, lest inconsistencies, some of which can be serious, may arise. Hanuman brings back Sita's hair-ornament from Lanka as authentic proof to show that he had



indeed met her in her captivity. When Bharata tries to follow Rama, on the ground in Guha's land where Rama and Sita had rested, he saw tiny bits of gold and silken threads sticking to the grass. Was Sita then dressed like a princess when she accompanied Rama? Rama and Lakshmana had to put on the ascetics' garment of tree-bark when they started the exile.

We now go back to an episode<sup>26</sup> which not only eliminates all inconsistency in Sita having her jewels and cloth of gold, but creates one of the most poignant moments on the epic. When the hour of leaving for the forest arrives, Rama and Lakshmana cast off their royal garments and put on the dress of bark. Kaikeyi herself distributes these garments. Sita shrinkingly receives the garment from Kaikeyi. She does not know how to wear this rough, shapeless tissue. She knew that Rama had been accustomed to forest life before he won her as his bride. So with tear-stained eyes, she turns to him. "How do ascetics wear such dresses?" Rama now begins to drape it round her. The ladies of the court break down at this sight and cry out that there is no reason why Sita should go on exile. But Sita had herself refused to stay back and Rama silently continues to drape her. Suddenly becoming self-conscious and bashful, Sita wants to do it herself and between the two of them they make a clumsy job of it. The humour here is moistened with tears. Vasishta, the king's preceptor, breaks down at this and cries out that Sita should not go to the forest but should be made heir-apparent in the place of Rama. But this is not agreed to by Rama and Sita. Then Vasishta orders that Sita should not wear the bark dress but should retain her regal robes.

Troubled dreams seen by certain characters on crucial occasions confer a romantic poignancy to the narrative. Bharata was living for many years with his uncle. He was not in Ayodhya when Rama left and his father died of a broken heart. Messengers are sent to fetch him. That night Bharata sees many nightmares. "I saw the sea dry up and the moon fall on the earth and the world plunged in darkness. I saw the earth rent and the leaves of the trees wither and the mountains riven and emit smoke. I beheld the king on an iron seat, clad in black, and women attired in black and yellow mocking him . . . I saw him in faded apparel, his hair dishevelled, falling headlong from a mountain peak into



a chasm."<sup>27</sup> In Lanka, just before Ravana's death, Trijata, one of the demonesses who guard Sita, also has a dream which she relates to her companions. She saw Ravana, intoxicated with drink, wearing a red cloth and a garment of red flowers. (Criminals were dressed like this when they were taken for execution). He was laughing and dancing like a mad man and then sped away to the south (the direction in which Yama, the god of death, is supposed to dwell) in an ass-driven chariot. She had seen him again, falling head downwards and disappearing into a pit of filth. The terrible goddess Kali, dressed in scarlet robes, was dragging him. *passage*

Though the ground tone is serious, humour often relieves it. Manthara, the old woman who poisoned the mind of Kaikeyi, was a hunchback. Kaikeyi is in raptures when she listens to her. "You are peerless among the hunchbacks in the world. There are ugly hunchbacks. But you are like a lotus flower bent by the breeze. You are like a royal swan. A thousand stratagems are concealed in your hunch. I shall deck you and especially your hunch with ornaments after smearing it with fragrant sandal-paste."<sup>28</sup> When Hanuman returns from Lanka with news of Sita, there is a sudden relaxation of tension and the monkey soldiery call it a day by raiding the orchard of Sugriva, laying it waste and beating up its keeper Dadhimukha, in spite of the fact that he was the uncle of their king Sugriva. He reports the vandalism to Sugriva who sees in it only the sure sign that Hanuman must have come back from his mission with good news.<sup>29</sup>

Superb descriptive powers are revealed by Valmiki in the narration. A sudden chill descends on the sunlit banks of the Godavari when Ravana arrives to carry off Sita. "Beholding that terrible apparition the leaves of the trees ceased to flutter, the wind died away and the murmuring river suddenly became silent."<sup>30</sup> The descriptions of Ayodhya earlier, and that of Lanka seen by Hanuman, are both magnificent, but there is a subtle contrast. Ayodhya's magnificence is the result of industry and cultured taste. Lanka's is that of an aggressive, insatiate hedonism. Exceptionally brilliant is the description of the private apartments of the palace. It was midnight and after music and merriment, the ladies of the seraglio all lay in various poses fast asleep, looking like a pond of lotus blossoms, like stars fallen from heaven



and gathered together, or like a huge garland strung with blossoms of girls. The air is close with their perfumed breath impregnated with the aroma of wine.<sup>31</sup> On a golden couch Ravana was reposing, his bejewelled body seeming like a vast thundercloud at dusk, riven with lightning.<sup>32</sup> He was sleeping after drink and sport with the damsels of the seraglio. The description of the splendour of Lanka is to be contrasted not only with the purer beauty of Ayodhya, but with the later picture when Hanuman sets fire to the great city. On the balconies and at the windows of the houses on flames, women screamed. With their children they ran hither and thither. The bright metal pillars of the mansions shone in the flames like columns of fire within fire. The burning houses cracked and fell. The sparks of the great fire were saffron in one place, scarlet in another and dark in yet another. Smoke wrapped mansions like a cloud. The scene has an awful, weird beauty. "That fire of incalculable fury, rising into the sky, with its flames resembling Kimshuka flowers, its cloud of smoke like unto the blue lotus looked exceedingly beautiful."<sup>33</sup>

Valmiki's treatment of nature deserves detailed comment for many reasons. Firstly, we see in the Ramayana a magnificent development of the sensitiveness to the beauty of nature which we saw in Vedic literature. The miniature painting of the Vedic hymns expands here into vast frescoes, taking in wide horizons of hill and plain, woodland and seashore. Secondly, the observation is most vivid here, while much of the later Kavya literature will fail to remember the true lineaments of nature's visage in the search for laboured figures and conceits. Thirdly, a philosophy of life is implicit in the sensitiveness to nature. Lastly, the descriptions of nature are built into the narrative, not as additive ornament, but as functional elements.

When Bharata implores Rama again and again to return to Ayodhya and rule it, he is gentle but firm in his refusal. His final benediction is this: "O Bharata, do thou return joyfully to the capital and I will cheerfully proceed to the forest. May the royal canopy protect thee from the sun's heat, I shall seek shelter from its rays in the dense shadows of the trees."<sup>34</sup> The most important thing to note here is that there is not the slightest bitterness in this choice. Intuitively, Rama feels that the life close to nature, to the virgin forests, which he is entering, is going



to be a profoundly enriching experience, more than compensating the amenities of urban life he is leaving behind.

The ground for the formation of this attitude had in fact been laid very much earlier, in the impressionable years of boyhood. Even when they were quite young boys, Rama and Lakshmana were taken into the forests by the sage Viswamitra who sought the permission of King Dasaratha to take the help of the warrior lads for suppressing the rowdiness of the demons who were harassing the ascetics living in the forests. Viswamitra had pointed out again and again the beauty of the sylvan landscape to Rama and the impressions had sunk into his heart, to blossom later as a clear perception of new values. Once, after regaling the boys with the story of his own family, Viswamitra points attention to the lateness of the night and bids them repose. "See, O son of the line of Raghu! Motionless now are all trees, silent the beasts and birds and the quarters shrouded in the gloom of night. How imperceptibly has the sunlight ebbed away from the sky! The night sky is growing full of eyes. Dense with stars and constellations it glitters with myriad points of light."<sup>35</sup> That radiant night with its million stars glowed in the heart of the boy with undiminished lustre as he slept under the trees and as he grew the unconscious conviction grew strong in him that the world was the loveliest of gifts from God to man. "The sky is an awning created by God himself for His universe, lit by the sun by day and the moon, planets and stars by night." When, in his exile, he came to the Chitrakuta hill, the beauty of the spot makes him exclaim, "Lovely Sita, when I behold the Chitrakuta hill and the Mandakini river, in company with thee, I feel a greater joy than any Ayodhya could yield me."<sup>36</sup>

The beauty of nature is inexhaustible. Every landscape is different, and the same landscape changes from moment to moment with the change in the play of light. Rama never becomes tired of the endless pageant and points out each fresh miracle, each fresh benediction, to Sita. "O Sita, see how the spring has dressed the Palasa trees in sweet-scented blossom, these crimson flowers glowing like fire and the branches decked with flowers as if adorned with garlands. See these incredibly massive honeycombs hanging on the trees . . . The blossoms scattered by the force of the wind make it seem as if the Chitrakuta hill itself



were offering flowers to the river. Here the waters of the Mandakini sparkle like gems and there they form a sandy beach. Behold the heaps of flowers shaken down from the branches by the wind, and others floating through the air and falling into the river to be carried away by the stream . . . . Somewhere on this hill a level terrace must lie amidst groves of trees, a pure and stainless place where we shall dwell."<sup>37</sup> The place is found and Rama enjoys a few days of unalloyed happiness. "Beloved, bathing thrice a day with thee in the river and living on honey, fruits and berries, I feel no desire for the comforts of Ayodhya."<sup>38</sup> The Canto closes on a profound note, where any regret, that may have been felt at the first impact of the shock and that was transformed later into reconciliation by the moral idealism, changes over completely into the pure joy of an existence attuned to nature. "Living on the pleasant mountain, Chitrakuta, by the river, Rama forgot the capital and remembered his renunciation no more."<sup>39</sup>

The profound, absolute significance of nature to the spirit being thus established, let us now pass on to the perfection of the objective quality of the descriptions of nature in Valmiki. The detail is seized with acute visual truth and the landscape as a whole with a full compositional richness. "The trees tossed by the breeze cause the hills to appear as if they were dancing."<sup>40</sup> This is a remarkable observation of the visual effect of the movement of foreground objects appearing to the eyes as the movement of the background, as when we see the moon sailing through clouds. Valmiki is especially sensitive to the compositional transformation of landscapes seen from an aerial perspective. This comes out in the description of the earth below seen from far above in the sky by Jatayu, the great eagle who tried to stop Ravana when he abducted Sita and died in the fight. "The earth with its various cities appeared like chariot wheels. The mountains appeared like pebbles and the rivers like threads binding the earth. The Himalayas, Vindhya and that mighty mountain Meru resembled elephants standing in a pond."<sup>41</sup>

*and night*  
The rhythm of the day enables the poet to give us beautifully composed vignettes, while the pageant of the seasons gives the scope for great frescoes. In the hermitage of the sage Atri, whose wife Anasuya comforts Sita and gives her gracious advice on the duties of women, we have a beautiful description of the advent



of dusk over the quiet retreat. "The sun has gone down behind the mountain ranges and the lovely night is near at hand. See! the birds who have sought food far and wide all day, are now returning home to rest. Hark, how they sing! The holy ascetics, too, are returning from their bathing in their wet robes of bark with brass vessels in their hands. The smoke, in hue resembling a pigeon's neck, rising from the sacred fires, is being driven by the wind here and there. The trees, scarcely seen in the distance, appear like dense clouds in the gathering darkness. The light is slowly fading in every quarter. The tame deer of the hermitage are sleeping round the sacred altars."<sup>42</sup> As sunlight ebbs away, "the moon with its cool beams floats up and thrusts away the shadows from the world, gladdening the hearts of all things living on earth with its radiance."<sup>43</sup> As in Vedic poetry, the night is not the time of darkness but of soft luminosity. She is a beautiful lady whose gentle visage is the newly risen full moon and whose numerous eyes are the stars. The luminous air is her white mantle.<sup>44</sup>

The pageant of the seasons allows painting on a more spacious scale. Unforgettable is the picture of the Pampa lake in spring. Its clear waters glow like gems in the sunlight. "The lake is studded with lotuses and lilies and the banks with many kinds of trees. . . . The thick grass, of a deep emerald blue, is sprinkled with different flowers that have fallen from the trees and resembles a bright carpet . . . . The bees, murmuring loudly when the bunches of flowers agitated by the spring breeze toss them back into the air, seem to sing a song to the frolicsome wind. Stirred by the breeze, the trees add their voices to the humming of the bees in the fragrant groves. Tossed by the air currents that sway them, their crests covered with blossom and crowned with bees, the trees seem about to break into song."<sup>45</sup>

Implacable summer arrives now to reign over the swooning earth and the hushed woods. But the rains come at last. "The dust settles and a cool wind blows. The heat of the summer is allayed . . . . Now the rainy season is here and the heavens are laden with clouds as huge as hills . . . . Sometimes visible, sometimes invisible, the sky, sown with clouds, looks like an ocean encircled by hills. One can ascend to heaven by the staircase of the clouds . . . . Emerging from the heart of the clouds, cool as



camphor, redolent with the fragrance of Ketaka flowers, the balmy winds can, it would seem, be gathered in cupped hands and sipped . . . . From the flowers, bruised by the downpour, the nectar drips drop by drop . . . . Choked with fallen blooms, coloured with the dissolved mineral ores, the mountain streams rush past, the voice of their waters blending with the cry of the peacocks. The summits of the mountains washed by the rain sparkle, their cataracts twisting and falling like strings of pearls. Obstructed in their course by the jutting rocks, these mighty waterfalls precipitate themselves from the heights into the valleys like necklaces of pearls that break and scatter . . . . The grassy slopes of the forest tracts revived by the rain, where the peacocks dance, gleam brightly under the moon at night. The flocks of cranes, in love with the clouds, soar into the sky and seem like a pendulous chain of white lotuses swinging in the breeze . . . . The soft humming of the bees, the joyous croaking of the frogs and the rumbling of the clouds, resembling the roll of drums, create a veritable orchestra in the forest . . . . Only when the birds withdraw to the trees and the lotus closes, whilst the evening jasmine opens, can one divine that the sun has set. Chariots and other wheeled vehicles no longer venture on the roads, deeply rutted by continuous rain."<sup>46</sup>

Autumn follows. "The god of rain, having saturated the earth with water and caused the grain to germinate, his task accomplished, is now resting. The fury of the thunderclouds has abated and after having shed their waters they have disappeared in their airy flight . . . . The sky has cleared and is as bright as a drawn sword. The rivers become thinner, their water clearer. The sounds of the rivers, the clouds, the waterfalls, the winds, the cry of the peacocks and the croaking of frogs all cease together. The surface of the great lake, with a solitary swan floating there asleep amidst countless water lilies, resembles the heavens free from cloud, illuminated by the full moon and myriad stars. The river banks, adorned with flowering shrubs, stirred by a gentle breeze, resemble coloured linen, washed bright and laid in the sun to dry. At break of dawn, the flute notes of the breeze among the reeds by the river mingle with the soft moos of the cows, the bellows of the bulls. On the rivers, freed from mud by the growing warmth of the sun, with their sandy banks and peaceful ripples



frequented by herds of kine, re-echoing to the cry of cranes, herons frolic joyously."<sup>47</sup>

The cycle of the seasons closes with winter. "The long cold nights are with us and it is no longer possible to sleep in the open. Enveloped by the mists of the month of the Pushya star, stained by dew, even on full moon nights, the moon has no lustre. Its frozen disc is dim, like a mirror tarnished by the breath. The rare clear days are a benediction, but generally there is only faint sunshine. With its rays scarcely penetrating the fog, the sun, long after it has arisen, continues to resemble the moon. But gradually gaining strength, it rejoices the heart at noon, its rays shedding a pale beauty on the earth, causing the woodland stretches, covered with grass and drenched with dew, to sparkle. Now that the snow is blended with its breath, the west wind is icy, and the mornings are biting cold. Ice-cold is the water of the Godavari river at the hour of morning ablution. The wild elephant, though tormented by extreme thirst, withdraws its trunk suddenly on coming into contact with the chill water. The waterfowls, standing on the banks, dare not enter the stream. Their cries can be heard, but they cannot be seen in the fog. In the fields in the shallow water swamps adjoining the lake, the paddy stalks bend with the weight of the golden grain and brush the pollen of the lotuses, inhaling their fragrance. Enveloped in dew at evening and wreathed in cold grey mist at dawn, the trees, bereft of flowers, stand frozen as if they have fainted."<sup>48</sup>

These exquisite paintings, free from the laboured conceits which vitiate later poetry, are throughout functional, organic elements in the evolution of the epic. First of all, they intuit the profound reality of the great life of nature that pulses in strong, broad rhythms all around us. By becoming aware of these great rhythms, man realises that his destiny is part of a greater destiny. The betrayals of men are forgotten, the exiled prince acquires a new, great realm of profound experience. Secondly, these descriptions allow the manipulation of the tempo of the narration, gaining the magnificence of a slow movement which can alternate with the sections of the narrative where action is speeded up. Thirdly, they serve to accent the mood, unobtrusively strengthening the emotional tone. The pathetic fallacy is a favourite device used for this purpose by writers. Nature is seen as sympathising with



man, exulting with him in his joy, lamenting with him in his travails. Talented treatment can make the device effective, but there is always a weakness inherent in it, since the greatest skill can never make us quite forget that it is after all a literary convention. Valmiki generally avoids it. Instead, he uses the psychologically more genuine principle of association. When the mind is filled with a dominant thought or emotion, certain cues of the external scene are unconsciously selected, and triggered by this unconscious association, the dominant emotion finds a fresh expression.

Movingly tender was the love of Rama and Sita. Therefore, after her abduction, the ground-tone of Rama's life became a grey, bereaved twilight. "Even a garland was not put by me around the neck of my beloved, lest it should hinder the closeness of our embrace. But now mountains and rivers have come between us." Time, which heals all wounds, cannot heal this sorrow. "As time passes, sorrow also generally disappears. But to me it increases day by day, so long as I am not able to look at my beloved." Camping on the shore of the mainland opposite Lanka, Rama becomes intensely disturbed as the south wind blows. "O wind, blow where my beloved is. Having touched her, come and touch me also so that through you I may feel her touch."<sup>49</sup>

Thus, while Rama's sensitive mind notes the beauty of nature in the rhythms of the day and of the seasons and the unconscious influence of nature does sink deep into his heart, some feature of the landscape invariably triggers an association, causing a fresh spurt of pain. When spring flames up on the banks of the Pampa lake, it sets fire to the heart afresh. "This fire of spring is consuming me." The spring is a great conflagration. The flaming red blossoms of the Asoka are its embers, its tender leaves golden tongues of flame, the humming of the bees the sibilant hissing of the fire. The lotus petals remind him of the beauty of Sita's eyes and the breeze filled with the fragrance of the flowers recalls her sweet-scented breath. The air, filled with the yellow pollen of the lotus, is like a spreading fire. If it is spring also in the land where Sita is, she too will suffer from poignantly stirred remembrance.<sup>50</sup>

The rainy season paints a totally different picture on the vast canvas of the earth and sky, but cannot help inflicting fresh



wounds, since remembrance is not at peace. "The sky appears like one wounded, bound with the rags of moisture-laden clouds, stained with the vivid tints of the setting sun, bordered with red. Whipped by the golden thong of the lightning, the sky seems to be crying out loud in the thunder. The lightning that leaps out from the hold of the cloud is to me like Sita struggling in the hold of Ravana."<sup>51</sup> Autumn too brings its load of tormenting memories. "With their girdle of swans, their wreaths of blue and white lotuses, the great lakes are surpassingly beautiful and resemble lovely women, decorated with jewels. Today, the rivers, wearing their silver fish as girdles, flow by slowly, reminding one of the languorous gait of lovely women in the dawn after a night of love."<sup>52</sup> The season of mellow fruitfulness is the most difficult to bear, because it reminds Rama most poignantly of his loneliness by crowding details rich in sensuous associations. "The waters of the rivers like garments are receding and, exposed little by little, the sandy banks of the rivers gleam like the alabaster thighs of shy maidens in love dalliance."<sup>53</sup> The description of the advent of night that follows defies translation. Sanskrit is rich in words with plural meanings and the poet uses this capacity of the language to evoke an exquisite picture of red twilight ebbing away from the sky with the rising of the moon and the stars and to suggest by resonance the picture of an amorously excited damsel gradually shedding her garments under the embrace of her lover. With so many suggestions crowding into the heart, Rama feels that he may not be able to survive the autumn. "O Lakshmana, the flowers that bear down the branches of the forest trees with their weight in the autumn will produce no fruit for me, and though so lovely, will fall rotting to the ground with their swarms of bees."<sup>54</sup>

The descriptions of nature serve yet another psychological purpose—the subtle differentiation of character. When nature at times appears like a woman to Rama, he remembers the only woman in his life and we are in the presence of a pure and chaste sorrow. Ravana is no barbarian. He too has poetic sensitiveness. But the sensuous suggestions of the landscape are interpreted by him in a manner that flatters his ego. He and his hosts once camp by the river Narmada. The breath of the river tempers the heat and the spot is ideal for a halt. Ravana is gratified. "The



sun of a thousand rays seems to have changed the world to gold and, in the sky, that orb of day, whose beams were just now intense, having observed me seated here, has grown as cool as the moon. The wind, fearing me, blows softly, diffusing a sweet perfume. Narmada appears like a timid girl." He strides towards the river "as towards a lovely and attractive woman." The river, though described by the poet and not Ravana, is seen through the eyes of that supreme hedonist. "The flowering trees formed her diadem, the lotus her eyes, the pair of Chakravaka birds her breasts, the gleaming sandbanks her thighs, the flock of swans her bright girdle. The pollen of the flowers powdered her limbs, the foam-crested waves formed her immaculate robe. Sweet was she to the touch."<sup>55</sup> If spring torments Rama with unbearable memories, it excites Ravana to inexcusable actions. Once he was camping in Kailasa. "When the immaculate moon rose over the mountain, the vast army lay sunk in sleep. The mighty Ravana, resting on the summit of the mountain, surveyed the splendour of the forests in the light of the moon. Many trees were in bloom. The waters of the Mandakini gleamed in the moonlight. The songs of nymphs came floating through the distance and, in the woods, the forest deities were engaged in love dalliance. Trees, shaken by the wind, covered the mountain with a shower of blossom, distilling the perfume of honey, and the breeze, laden with the aroma of pollen and nectar, excited Ravana's voluptuous desire. The songs, the myriad flowers, the fresh breeze, the beauty of the mountain in the night, and the moon at its zenith, threw Ravana, the mighty warrior, into a frenzy of passion."<sup>56</sup> The nymph Rambha appears on the scene, on her way to a tryst, and Ravana forcibly gratifies his lust.

style  
Finally, we come to Valmiki's style. If art is life seen through a temperament, it is also reality transformed by the alchemy of style. The concept of a beauty linking the world, unifying many disparate things, is basic to art and ultimately it unifies life and art too. Reconnoitring the sleeping city of Lanka, bathed in moonlight, Hanuman unconsciously feels the mellow transformation of the proud city by the soft light of the moon. "That goddess of beauty who reigns on the earth on the summit of Mount Mandara, and is born anew in the sea when red twilight fills the skies, who resides in the lotuses that bloom in lakes, the same goddess



now shone forth, enthroned in the orb of the moon."<sup>57</sup> This goddess, when she comes to reside in art, can transform even sorrow into a radiant poetic expression. Standing on the seashore of the mainland opposite Lanka, feeling at once near to Sita and far from her, Rama feels that the serene moonlight somehow mediates between them. She too must be looking at the resplendent moon now and he feels that their eyes meet through looking on the same orb of light.<sup>58</sup>

The diction and style that such an attitude justifies have to be a refined recreation of ordinary speech. This is not a movement away from life, but the generation of a new order of life. The poet endows the word with beauty, as nature has endowed the mountain peak, the twilit sea and the lotus with beauty. Life and art are unified in a realm of beauty. After removing Rama and Lakshmana from near Sita by stratagem, Ravana abducts Sita "like darkness overwhelming twilight in the absence of the sun and moon." When he finds that Sita has been lost, Rama addresses a passionate query to the sun. "Every action of the people in the world is seen by you. You are the supreme witness. Tell me, lord, where is Sita?" He interrogates the wind also thus. Asoka means "sorrowless." The style can easily take the load of a word-play also without weakening the emotional tone. "O Asoka tree! Be true to your name, remove my sorrow. You must know the truth. Tell me where is Sita now. O tall palm tree! You must be able to see where Sita is."<sup>59</sup>

Rhetorical flamboyance is used, but with perfect justness of effect, in the description of Hanuman leaping across the gulf of sea which separated the mainland from Lanka. His body grows to a tremendous stature. The mountain he uses as a footboard is crushed by his weight and the ores in its core run out in viscous streams. Vast forests are flung into the air by the impetus of his tremendous bound. His body, covered with flowers from these uprooted trees, shines like a hill aglow with fireflies or a massive cloud embellished by lightning. The wind currents, generated by the great commotion, carry the flowers to the sea which thus begins to look like the firmament when the stars appear. His speed creates storms that agitate the sea and pile up mountainous waves.<sup>60</sup>

The narration becomes low-toned in the description of the



captive Sita whom Hanuman sees. There is also a sharp contrast of tone between the exultant beauty of the Asoka grove and the grief-stricken beauty of Sita. "The foliage of the grove was almost concealed by the hundreds of birds disporting themselves there. The Asoka trees seem to have burst forth into blossom right to their very roots . . . . Clad in a soiled robe of yellow silk, divested of every ornament, the lady imprisoned in the grove resembled a lotus pool stripped of its flowers. With her long hair hanging down her back, she looked like the earth with its dark blue forests in the rainy season. Who was this lady shining with lustrous beauty, though her form was but slowly recognisable like a flame of fire enveloped in a cloud of smoke?"<sup>61</sup>

While some orthodox minds still insist on treating the Ramayana as a theological treatise, the poetic tradition has paid a due homage to Valmiki by regarding him as the *Adi Kavi* or First Poet. This does not ignore the wealth of sheer poetry in the Vedic literature which was certainly prior to Valmiki, for he remains the first to handle an epic theme in a fully orchestrated poetic tissue of vast spread. The extended horizons of his mind took in hill and plain, river and sea. Extended descriptions of such a vast landscape became an obligatory feature of the Kavya in later days. But many of the later poets forgot the profound human significance of this great communion with nature. Not many could, likewise, enshrine in their work the inspired and inspiring vision of man, life and destiny which Valmiki embodied in concrete episode and imagery in his great poem. But even when they could not fully understand him, they felt the power of his mind and the great narrative proved an inexhaustible mine for innumerable epic poems and dramas.

## II. *The Maha Bharata*

The Maha Bharata<sup>62</sup> is the longest epic in world literature. With its hundred thousand stanzas, it is about eight times the size of the Iliad and the Odyssey put together. There is internal evidence to show that the epic originally consisted of about twenty-four thousand stanzas only. Its growth to the present size seems to have been completed by about the fourth century A.D., but the process is conjectured to have stretched back to about seven or



eight centuries. Single myths, legends and poems dating back to the Vedic period, narrative ballads and lays about heroes and chivalry, the folk-literature stream and moral narratives and gnomic utterances from the tradition of ascetic poetry have all flowed into this tremendous work. But the internal evidence is unmistakable that the main narrative was by one author, although he may have welded together material from different sources. According to tradition this author was Vyasa.

Though the work has become one of the most important sources of the moral and religious tradition of India, the Veda of the masses in fact, it is essentially a literary work, the mirroring of life in art. The work describes itself, right at the outset, as an epic poem or Kavya<sup>63</sup> and it is as a Kavya that Ananda Vardhana, one of the greatest of Sanskrit literary critics, studies it towards the end of his classic, the *Dhvanyaloka*. A delicate idealism is the dominant feature of Valmiki. Probably Vyasa lived nearer to the centre of an era of turbulence and disorder, of the throes of an empire in the making. The poetic sensitivity is unmistakably there. But the dominant note is intellectuality. He is profoundly interested in ideas, in metaphysics, in ethical problems. Living in a world of myriad tensions, his analytical mind came to grips with the complexities of historical existence far more closely than Valmiki's. He treats the problems of society and government from the point of view of practical statesmanship and he subjects morality to casuistic tests from which the delicate moral tone of Valmiki's spirit shrank. The granite quality of the mind is reflected in the quality of the narrative. It courses with speed and momentum, reluctant to linger in purely lyrical descriptions, and the great panorama he builds up has the enduring strength of vast reliefs on hard stone.

The kernel of the epic must have had a basis in history. Echoes of clan rivalry are found even in Vedic literature. There might have been keen rivalry between the two neighbouring tribes of the Kurus and Panchalas. In the Yajur Veda these two tribes already appear united and in the Kathaka Samhita, King Dhritarashtra Vaichitravirya is mentioned as a well-known figure. This nucleus is expanded by Vyasa into a full-blooded plot, where the rivalry between the Kurus, sons of Dhritarashtra, and the Pandavas, sons of Pandu, the brother of Dhritarashtra, explodes at the



end of a long narrative into a great battle for empire. There are numerous digressions. But, as Pisani has pointed out, at least the longer ones of these digressions have been introduced into the story in such a manner as to fill up temporal hiatuses consisting of uneventful years, hiatuses which are bound to occur in a very detailed and elaborate narrative covering a period of nearly two centuries. The main stream of the narrative scarcely ever loses dramatic animation.

✓ Aurobindo<sup>64</sup> thinks that stories like that of Nala and Damayanti were the early narrative poems of the young Vyasa which were subsequently incorporated into his masterpiece. A swan mediates as the messenger between King Nala and the beautiful princess Damayanti. They are united in wedlock but cruel fate makes Nala an exile from his kingdom and forces him to abandon his wife in the forest. After many vicissitudes they come together again. The adolescent love of the romantic, of the fairy tale, is mirrored in many episodes in this story, one of the most beautiful in the Indian heritage. But already we see glimpses of the later confidence and maturity, both in the soft touch as well as the sombre mood. An instance of the former is the entry of Nala in Kundinapura where Damayanti lived in loneliness after their separation. Nala was a superb horseman and charioteer. He had taught his horses to go down softly on their knees, as a gesture of homage to the gods, before starting on a journey. They were also trained to keep a fast pace. He was now entering the city in disguise, driving a different chariot and team. But the familiar clatter was heard by his own pensive horses long pent up in their new stables and they were thrilled by it—a fine touch which recalls the recognition of Ulysses, after many years of absence, by his faithful old dog.

The mastery of the sombre comes out in the scene where Nala, visited with madness, abandons Damayanti in the forest. The terror and loneliness of the princess are suggested with a bare but confident economy in the description of the forest. The crowded enumeration of its features brings into stark relief its loneliness for Damayanti, abandoned by her sole protector. "Pools and tarns and summits everywhere; echoing woodland sound-pervaded; a void, tremendous forest thundering with crickets." Note the superb psychological skill in the selection of the adjective 'void'



to describe this crowded, echoing solitude. Now comes the last, benumbing touch, the cold hand of fear on the heart. "She many alarming shapes of fiend and snake and monsters beheld." We get a stark silhouette. "In grief she wailed, erect upon a cliff, her body aching with sorrow for her husband." Masterly in psychological insight is the lament that follows. "Ah, my lord! Ah, my husband! Why hast thou forsaken me? Alas, I am slain, I am undone. I am afraid in the lonely forest. Surely, O king, thou wert good and truthful, how then hast thou abandoned me in my sleep and fled? Long enough hast thou carried this jest of thine; I am frightened; show thyself, my lord and prince. I see thee! Thou art seen, concealing thyself, behind the bushes. Why dost thou not speak to me? Cruel King! It is not for myself I grieve; it is for thee I weep, thinking what will become of thee, left all alone. How wilt thou fare under some tree at evening, hungry and thirsty and weary, not beholding me, O my king?" The first shock of terror, the desperate attempt to convince herself that all this is a practical joke and the final outburst of protective sentiment for him who has left her unprotected, all have profound dramatic truth and impact in spite of their unadorned simplicity.

The story of Shakuntala which would be immortalised later by Kalidasa is also found in the Maha Bharata. There are sensitive touches here revealing the poetry of domesticated sentiments. "The weary man whom toils oppress when travelling through life's wilderness finds in his spouse a place of rest and there abides, refreshed and blest." Shakuntala speaks of the happiness and blessing which a son brings to his father. "He has begotten himself again as a son, thus say the wise ones. Therefore shall a man look upon his wife, the mother of his sons, as upon his own mother. Is there any higher blessedness than to see the little son return from play, covered with dust, and run to embrace his father's knees? He has sprung from thy loins, from one soul has another soul sprung forth. Behold thy son, like a second self in a lake as clear as a mirror." In another story, a man, angry with his wife, asks his son to punish her. The son says, "Though one has sons and grandsons, even though one is five hundred years old, when he comes to his mother he behaves like a two-year-old child. When he has lost his mother, then a man becomes old, then he becomes unhappy, then the world is empty for him. There



is no cool shade like a mother, there is no refuge like a mother, there is no beloved like a mother . . . .”

Insight and literary powers deepened with the years and come to their finest fruition in the *Maha Bharata*. There is an impatience with ornament, which makes the description of nature brief, terse, realistic. The rains arrive during the stay of the Pandavas as exiles in the forest. “Skies were overcast and thunder’s rumbling heard. Day and night and at all hours, the rain poured and poured. With monsoon’s burst, clouds in numbers numberless hid the sun from sight, though lightnings played on them. The grass grew thick all around, insects and reptiles bred in numbers, the earth soaked wet and all dust was removed. Hills and dales, mountains and rivers, were all merged in the heavy rains. Torrents rushed with uproar terrific.”<sup>65</sup> The reticence of this style can be very deceptive, for we scarcely notice the skill with which full-blooded sensuous concretisations are presented to us with a few bold brush strokes. The warrior stands before us, “tall and erect like the standard of Indra”, wearing leathern arm-protectors and finger-guards, with his bow “bent into a complete circle”. Shining chariots race past us, “bright as the sun, upholstered with tiger-skins and garlanded with networks of little tinkling bells.” We are taken to palaces redolent with the fragrance of sandal-wood and scented aloe, pleasure parks bright with variegated lotus blossoms and frequented by flamingoes, and forest retreats, covered with thick carpets of wild flowers, echoing with the hum of bees and the recitation of Vedic chants. A single verse can complete a high key portrait, as this one of Drona, the venerable preceptor of the princes in the science of arms, “white-robed, with a white sacred thread, white sandal marks and garlands and with white locks crowning his head.”<sup>66</sup> We witness the mighty onslaught of warriors scattering their enemies “like the wind scattering clouds”, consuming them like “fire destroying a heap of cotton.” The self-immolation of warriors fascinated by the din and turmoil of the combat, throwing themselves headlong in the thick of the fray, is brought home to us by the illustration of moths falling into a fire. A young knight, partaking in a desperate and confused *melée* appears to an experienced old veteran watching him like “foam upon the billow when the mighty storm-winds roar.”



Drenched in colour is this sunlit world. And the extent to which the world has soaked into the blood of a writer can be understood by studying the colour references in his work, as shown by Belyi in his brilliant analysis of the spectrum of Gogol. His patiently collected statistical data on references to colour in Gogol's writings show the yellow graph rising steadily from the joyous *Evenings in the Village* through *Taras Bulba* and making its greatest quantitative leap upward in the second volume of *Dead Souls*, where the gold is not the gold of gold-plate and gold-thread, but the gold of the cathedrals and crosses of the Orthodox Church. At this depth, colour has become a symbol of inward temper. Such an analysis, if applied to Vyasa, would reveal how frequently the bright lustre of fire glows throughout the epic, in metaphor and simile. The body of a beautiful woman glows like fire. An ascetic, though clad in rags, impresses like glowing embers below the layer of ashes. Soldiery surrounds an enemy warrior like the circle of fire described in space by whirling a burning stick. The battle is like the conflagration which will consume the universe at the end of an eon. The aroused warrior glows like a burning pillar. The fiery energy of a chaste woman is like a kindled flame which one cannot trifle with, without being scorched. It is absolutely necessary to stress the full-blooded quality of Vyasa's narrative, for later on we shall see that the epic is also an allegory. But the rich tissue does not become anaemic through the pale cast of thought.

Folk-tradition has been used adroitly to enliven the narrative and widen its range of appeal. Mostly it takes the form of parables, narrated by some speaker to point a moral. Thus, in one parable, the ocean asks the rivers how it is that they uproot mighty trees and bring them to him, while they never bring the weak reed. The rivers reply that the trees oppose the current and are uprooted by the torrent while the reed bends to the current and stands erect again when the current has passed by. Frequently, old folk-tales are welded into the narrative more dramatically as when Sisupala, the enemy of Krishna, compares Bhishma with the hypocritical flamingo which always talked only of morality, with the result that the other birds trusted it with their eggs which it promptly ate up. Duryodhana, eldest of the Kurus, similarly compares Yudhishtira, seniormost of the Pandavas, to the cat



which practised austerities to entice mice. The most dramatic use of folk-material comes towards the end of the battle. The Kurus have been routed. Their commander Asvathama flees from the battle and takes shelter under a tree to spend the night there. Rage and thirst for revenge keep him awake. Then he sees a flock of crows nestling in the branches of the tree and how, suddenly, in the middle of the night, a fierce owl comes along and kills all the sleeping birds. This suggests to him the idea of falling upon his foes in their sleep and murdering them and he takes terrible revenge.

Before we proceed to study the characterization, the framework of the epic may be given in the briefest possible outline. King Santanu of Hastinapura, of the line of Bharata, falls in love with a beautiful fisher-girl and Bhishma, his son through Ganga, assures the girl's father that her children will get the throne and that he will surrender all claims to it. Bhishma, further, takes vows of celibacy so that he will leave no heirs to contest the throne later. Chitrangada, Santanu's son through the fisher-girl, dies in a battle. The second son, Vichitravirya, lives a dissolute life and as he dies early without issue, to maintain the line, the sage Vyasa blesses his queens with offspring. Dhritarashtra is born to queen Ambika, Pandu to queen Ambalika and Vidura to a palace maid. Dhritarashtra is the eldest, but as he is blind, Pandu is made king. Dhritarashtra and his queen Gandhari beget hundred sons, the eldest of whom is Duryodhana, and a daughter, Dussala. Pandu has two queens, Kunti and Madri. Kunti's children are Yudhishtira, Bhima and Arjuna and Madri's Nakula and Sahadeva. Dhritarashtra's children are called the Kurus, and Pandu's the Pandavas.

Since Pandu dies early, Dhritarashtra has to take over the government and the princes live together. From here begins the bitter rivalry between the cousins, the Kurus and Pandavas. When Dhritarashtra proclaims Yudhishtira as the heir-apparent, Duryodhana can contain himself no more and he plots the death of the Pandavas. They are persuaded to go to a holiday resort, Duryodhana's intention being to set fire to their pleasure palace at night. But the Pandavas come to learn of the plot and leave the place at night-fall. Adventures follow, during the course of which the Pandavas win Draupadi, a Panchala princess, as their bride.



On their return, to avoid conflicts, Dhritarashtra divides the kingdom into two, the Kurus getting Hastinapura and the Pandavas, Indraprastha. But the envious Duryodhana is not satisfied and he challenges Yudhishtira to a game of chess. The code of honour makes acceptance of such challenges obligatory. By trickery Yudhishtira is made to lose his kingdom and reduce his entire family to slavery. Dhritarashtra releases them and restores the kingdom back to them. The frustrated Duryodhana waits for some time and challenges Yudhishtira for a second game of chess. The Pandavas lose again and are compelled to go into the forests as exiles for twelve years. They have also to spend the thirteenth year in disguise. Many adventures fill up this long time span. The period over, the Pandavas return to claim their kingdom. Krishna, the friend of the Pandavas and the real hero of the epic, is sent on an embassy. He progressively reduces his demand to five villages, one village, five houses and even one house, but the arrogant Duryodhana refuses. A tremendous war breaks out. The Kurus are wiped out. Yudhishtira becomes emperor. The epic continues till the death of all the brothers and the ascent of Yudhishtira to heaven.

Not only is every character a solid, full-rounded creation with all the complexities of real, living figures, but there is also a close study of their development over a long span of time. Bhima, endowed with the strength of a giant, is characterised by recklessness and wild impetuosity. His good-natured but tactless bullying of Duryodhana in boyhood seems to have generated that antagonism in the Kuru prince which hardened into an obsession with the passing of the years. As an adolescent he worsted Duryodhana in a wrestling match during a tourney. The battle will see the resumption of that duel, this time a mortal combat. A remarkable episode brings out Vyasa's insight into the psychology of inferiority complexes and obsessional drives. When the Pandavas were living as exiles in the forest, Duryodhana wanted to visit the forests in all pomp to humiliate his cousins. But he comes across the Gandharva, Chitrangada, who had come to the woods with his ladies for sport, picks up a quarrel with him and is quickly taken captive. News of this reaches the Pandavas. Bhima is honestly pleased. But Yudhishtira commands: "Go, all of you, to the rescue of our kinsman. Whatever our mutual



differences, when there is insult from outside, we are a hundred and five brothers." Bhima's rescue of Duryodhana really embittered the latter further, for the man with an inferiority complex does not forgive anyone who has witnessed his humiliation even though the latter subsequently helps him out of his predicament.

The subtleties of commitments are too much for Bhima's simple, straightforward outlook and his spirit is seared by the gross, unforgivable behaviour of the Kurus. When Yudhishtira staked Draupadi also in the chess game and lost, the exultant Duryodhana bared his thigh and invited Draupadi to come and sit on his knee and his younger brother Dussasana attempted to disrobe the princess in the presence of the whole stunned assembly. The tortured Draupadi cries out, "Arise, arise, Bhima! Wherefore liest thou like one that is dead? For nought but dead is he whose wife a sinful hand has touched and lives." Flaming into wrath, Bhima wants to kill the Kurus then and there, but when Yudhishtira restrains him, his anger is turned against his elder brother. "Gamblers keep prostitutes in their houses and even them they do not use as a stake. This is insufferable. Because of you, Draupadi suffers this insult at the hands of these cruel, unbridled villains. My anger falls on you. Sahadeva, bring fire, I shall burn Yudhishtira's hands." He is restrained with difficulty. But he makes the terrible vow that Draupadi's hair which becomes dishevelled in the struggle with Dussasana shall remain unbraided till he ties them at last with his own hands wet with the blood of Duryodhana and Dussasana.

The undramatic, yet profound, greatness of Yudhishtira comes out in the way he manages to adhere to his high ideals of moral conduct, even though surrounded by persons like Bhima and Draupadi whose forthright nature cries out for vigorous resistance to cruel unfairness. Condemned to live as exiles in the forest, Bhima muses over all that has happened and is provoked into this challenging utterance. "The wise say that virtue means elevating oneself. This degradation is unworthy . . . . It is because you are dedicated to non-violence that you do not appreciate our distress . . . . Are you sure that you have not, out of despair, adopted the philosophy of eunuchs? It is only cowards, incapable of fighting for their right, who cherish sterile despair. The too righteous man becomes devitalised though his virtue, merit and



profit desert him, just as the capacities for joy and suffering desert the dead. This type of conduct is not virtue, but its contrary, a scourge." Bhima points out that he is a warrior and not an ascetic and the warrior's way to salvation is through resistance to evil. The most unbearable thing is that the Kurus did not win by manly fight, but by dishonest trickery in the chess game. Draupadi cannot adopt so peremptory a tone towards Yudhishtira. The way of the warrior is closed to her since she is a woman. Therefore, in her case, the impact of tragedy leads to a loss of faith in a just order of the world. "Men are puppets turned in the hands of God. The creator plays with them just as a child plays with toys. Man has no power over his actions. He is like a blade of straw blown hither and thither by the wind. Destiny drags him here and there like a bullock led by the rope or like a tree by the river bank which the flood's strong current has uprooted and carried with it." Yudhishtira quietly tells her that her thoughts are the thoughts of those whose faith in the cosmic order has been destroyed. "If acts do not bring in their returns, the world would be an immense deception. Acts do bear fruits, good and bad. A Providence rules the world." But the long-term pattern can be understood only by the wise in whose mind dwell quiet and peace and holiness. "Let your misgivings dissipate like a mist." The individual should leave the long-term governance of the world to God and practise virtue for its own sake. "My heart, O Draupadi, is naturally attracted towards virtue. The man who wishes to reap the fruits of virtue is a trader in virtue." He is convinced that the world will not progress, "if the injured person returneth his injuries, if the chastised person chastiseth in return."<sup>67</sup>

An intriguing episode is used to bring out Yudhishtira's entire philosophy of life in a pithy and condensed form. Once, while staying in the forests, the brothers go to a lake to fetch water and there meet a Yaksha or demon who poses riddles to them. When they cannot answer them they fall in a faint. When all the four brothers fail to return, Yudhishtira goes to the lake and his replies to the riddles sum up his faith. He is convinced that the cosmos is an order. The Yaksha asks, "What makes the sun rise? What makes it set? Whereon does it rest?" Yudhishtira answers "It is Brahman who makes the sun rise. It is Eternal Law that makes it set. On Truth it reposes." Another query



brings out his ideal of social organisation. Social leadership should rest on capacity, not heredity. "On what depends the status of the Brahmin?" "The status of the Brahmin does not depend either on heredity or knowledge of the Vedas, but on conduct alone." Another series of question and response deals with the integration of personal life. "What is that, giving up which makes one sociable?" "Pride." "What is that renouncing which causes no frustration?" "Anger." "What is that the surrender of which makes one rich?" "Cupidity." "What is real knowledge?" "Comprehension of the ultimate Reality." "What is peace?" "The contentment of the soul." "What is pity?" "The desire to do good to all." This episode brings out the brilliant manner in which Vyasa handles old traditions. The literary riddle goes back to the Vedas. Here it is worked into an episode, which is a welcome break in the monotony of the long stay in the forest, and also stepped up to a higher plane, as a pithy expression of a whole philosophy of life. There is a further brilliant refinement, furnishing an episodic confirmation of Yudhishtira's character, already revealed in his responses. Satisfied with his answers, but wishing to test him further, the Yaksha says that he will bring back to life anyone of his brothers. Yudhishtira chooses Nakula, who is not his real brother, but half-brother. When the Yaksha is puzzled by this choice, he explains: "My father had two wives, Kunti and Madri. Therefore, let each have a surviving son. As I make no difference between the two mothers, let Nakula return to life."<sup>68</sup>

The unforgivable crimes of Duryodhana led inevitably to war and to his own death. While Bhima exulted over his fallen enemy, Yudhishtira felt the pity of it all and the most revelatory of his utterances is his words to the enemy, from whom he had received so much ill-treatment, but who was also his cousin. "Sinless Duryodhana, you must not feel sorry for yourself. Laudable is your death. It is ourselves, bereft of dear kinsmen, who should be pitied."

Vyasa's genius for presenting character in all its complexity is revealed in Karna. Kunti, the mother of the elder Pandavas, had got a boon that she could invoke any god to bless her with a son. Believing and yet unbelieving she invokes the Sun-God and gets Karna. Frightened at this quick fulfilment, she abandons him and he is brought up by a charioteer. Duryodhana befriends



him and he becomes his lieutenant. He shapes into a fine warrior, "like the sun in noontide brilliance, like the all-consuming fire, lion-like in build and muscle, stately as a golden palm." He has greatly virtues, but they spring partly as a reaction to his own keen sense of his inferior status, for the world saw him only as the son of a charioteer, though he was really the eldest Pandava. He is generous in his gifts but there is the feeling that he wants to outdo the nobles through a showy display of that aristocratic virtue. All the five Pandavas were the spiritual sons of various gods as he was the son of the Sun-God. Arjuna's spiritual progenitor was Indra. This god begs from Karna the armour and ear-rings which the Sun-God had given him and which made him invincible in battle. Though Indra came in the guise of a Brahmin mendicant, Karna sees through the disguise. But he parts with his protective gifts in a lovable, though irresponsible and showy gesture. The aristocratic elder, Bhishma, does not like him. Karna feels that there is in this dislike a contempt for his low origins and he refuses to fight as long as Bhishma is alive. On the eve of the battle, Kunti tries to win him over. But he is not willing to go over to the side of the mother who had deserted him and desert Duryodhana who had befriended him. His greatest rival is Arjuna, for although he was the equal of the latter in archery, the world gave pre-eminence to a noble as against a charioteer's son. In the battle he is slain by Arjuna, but this was no clean victory for, due to a former curse, Karna's chariot wheels kept sinking into the mire and he was handicapped in his manoeuvring. He protests that the chivalric code dictated that he should be given time to set right his chariot before the fight is resumed. But Krishna retorts that the man who witnessed without interfering Dussasana's insult to the helpless Draupadi and was a party to Duryodhana's treacheries should not invoke ethics at his convenience. Vyasa sees all his faults. But he also sees that they were generated by the cruel ostracism of the world. We see him as a victim of circumstances and with all his faults, Karna remains one of the most lovable characters in this great epic. ✓

The full, rounded vitality of characterisation does not decrease when we pass on to the people of the elder generation. Dhritarashtra is a good man, but lacks the strength to persevere in his



goodness. He cannot control his unruly sons, for his love for them is often blind to their faults. When his half-brother, the man of wise counsels, Vidura, advocates the recall of the Pandavas, Dhritarashtra cries out, "Undoubtedly, they also are my sons. But Duryodhana is sprung from my body. Who, if he sees impartially, can say: 'Give up thy body for the sake of another?'" He releases the Pandavas and restores their kingdom to them after the first chess game. But he cannot prevent his son from playing the trick again. When things go wrong, he takes refuge in fatalism and says that destiny is supreme and one must accept the inevitable. In part his weakness is due to his blindness, but the physical blindness often becomes a moral myopia.

A far finer character is his wife, Gandhari. Her opposition to the misdeeds of Duryodhana is always more clear and less ambiguous, though she too finds it impossible to restrain him. Vyasa uses her with superb dramatic sense at the end of the battle. The terrible destruction wrought by the battle is not described by the poet in his own words but in the words of this queen-mother, who recalls Hecuba, mother of the Trojan princes. She contemplates the flower of India's chivalry which lay dead on that field. She sees Duryodhana and remembers with anguish how he had said farewell to her on the eve of the battle. He had come to seek her blessing for victory. Her reply had been: "Son, Heaven avert a cruel fate! Triumph attends on virtue." There was a premonition in that reply. But, "the valour has wiped the sins," and all thoughts of error and punishment now recede to give room for a mother's sorrow for her dead son. "He, whom once lovely women cooled with their fans, is now fanned only by the birds of prey with their wings." She sees Duryodhana's widow vainly hugging him in her grief and then turning to hug her little boy. "From dear departed husband she turns to her dearest son and the tears of the mother choke the widow's bitter groan." Gandhari sees her son Vikarna lying, with dismembered limbs, in the midst of slain war-elephants, "as when the moon is surrounded by dark clouds in the autumnal sky." Then her gaze rests on Karna, who had once been so much feared by all and who now lies there like a mighty tree brought low by the storm. As a mother she was caught in the terrible net spun by her sons' misdeeds. But she had never been partisan. She mourns the dead of the Pandava



line too. She sees the boy-hero Abhimanyu, Arjuna's son, whose beauty even death has not been able entirely to destroy. His girl-wife Uttara draws near to him, strokes him, removes his heavy armour, binds his loosened bloody locks, lays his head on her lap and speaks to him tender words. Gandhari's lament evokes a sombre panorama, filled with the pieties of mothers hugging their slaughtered children all unconscious in their last sleep and "widows bending upon their husbands and weeping in ceaseless sorrow." The finest touch comes when Gandhari, who had lost all her hundred sons, embraces Draupadi and each woman, consumed by sorrow, tries to console the other. It is a powerful silhouette, of two women, irredeemably bereft, outlined against the stark battlefield with its fallen myriads, symbolising the tragedy that men's ambitions and hatreds can bring in their wake.

And yet this war had to be fought. That is the great lesson of the Maha Bharata. Here we move from the stream of episodes to the central idea and the world-view of the author. It is necessary to realise that this is an existential view. For Vyasa realises that individuals, generations, empires, all will disappear in the mighty flood of time and yet he insists on a heroic activism, the acceptance of a moral imperative. This needs careful clarification. \*

Vidura, product of amorganatic alliance, was excluded from the nobility and, therefore, also from its high ambitions and tumultuous conflicts. He found perfect adjustment in a quiet tenor of life and was respected by everybody for his sober and wise counsels. This is one of the parables which he narrates to Dhritarashtra: A traveller once loses his way in a terrible forest, full of beasts of prey, is chased by a demoness and falls into a well. His fall is broken by the intertwined branches of a creeper growing from the side of the well and he lies suspended there, feet upwards, head downwards. But the danger of his predicament increases. A terrible six-headed and twelve-footed tusker approaches and guards the mouth of the well, while at the bottom of the well he sees a dreadful dragon with mouth agape. Black and white mice are busy gnawing away the roots of the creeper which has broken his fall. In the branches of the tree which overhang the well swarm multitudes of bees, preparing honey. The honey drops down and is greedily sipped by the man, for even in this predicament he is not weary of existence.

Parable  
and  
explan-  
tion



Vidura now explains the parable. The forest is Samsara, existence in the world. The beasts of prey are the diseases, the demoness is old age, the well is the body, the dragon is time, the elephant is the year with its six seasons and twelve months. The creeper is the hope of life, the white and black mice are the days and nights, and the drops of honey are sensual enjoyments.

This is the mood of the Maitrayana Upanishad all over again. The ascetic tradition of world-negation had become a strong tradition. Vyasa could not accept it, but he was prepared to accept its postulate of the transience of things. That is why he gave the statement of the ascetic outlook to a character who, by his origins, was withdrawn from the active life of the warrior. This device could present the view without committing the poet to it. But he was realist enough not to deny the inexorable might of Time. All things have to face dissolution ultimately. No victory is permanent and death arrives sooner or later. Victory was bitter to Yudhishtira with his wider sympathies, for he felt the death of even his enemies as a loss. It was bitter to his less sensitive brothers too, for the battle, especially Asvathama's night attack, had slain many of their own kindred. At the conclusion of the battle, when victory seemed completely stabilised by the utter rout of the enemies, the voice of doom is heard, this time from no doughty surviving enemy warrior but from a weak and helpless woman, all the more terrible since the complete dissociation of the prophetic doom from any active personal programme for its fulfilment makes it look ordained, inevitable. Gandhari turns to Krishna who had inspired Arjuna to fight when he was in a mood to call off the battle, blames him for the fratricidal holocaust and prophesies that his own clan, the Yadavas, will perish by fratricide within four decades. Krishna replies that he knows that it was so ordained and he would have to see to that also as the Yadavas will grow in pride and will have to be eliminated.

The years roll on and the prophesy comes to pass. The sea floods the capital of Krishna, his folk perish in fratricidal conflict and he himself passes away. The dazed Arjuna cries to Vyasa: "The passing of Krishna is as incredible to me as the drying up of the ocean, the moving of the Mandara mountain, the falling of the skies and the cooling of fire. . . . When I see that Krishna



of those great lotus-eyes is no more, I become faint, I do not want to continue to live." Vyasa comforts him. "Strength, intellect and power appear in their time and fall when time changes. Time gives, and Time takes away, Time is the root of the world. The time has also come for your departure."

If the transience of individuals, generations and empires is accepted, what is vigorously rejected is the ascetic conclusion that one should withdraw from the world. Very interesting in this context is the account in the beginning of the *Bhagavata Purana*, Vyasa's later work, about how it came to be written. On the surface, the story of the Maha Bharata is one of violence, gambling, dishonouring of women and a devastating war which ends in a pyrrhic victory. The sage Narada felt far from reassured with this type of material. He tells Vyasa: "However much your ultimate idea may be the inculcation of Dharma, you ought not to have put before the people stories with loathsome themes and incidents. By nature addicted to the obvious pleasures of the senses, they revel in this ambiguous material and miss the inner message." Narada exhorts Vyasa to compose a work breathing the spirit of pure devotion and Vyasa proceeded to give the world the *Bhagavata* with its idyllic beauty. But the episode does bring out the massive strength and originality of Vyasa's outlook. The orthodox religious mind shied away from the world with its violence and lack of inhibitions. Its very touch was felt to be a contamination. But Vyasa boldly accepted the world as an arena of stormy challenge to the spirit of man.

The whole epic is the assertion of the heroic activism of the warrior against the world-denial of the ascetic. There are many echoes of the conflict between the Brahmin and the Kshatriya, ascetics and warriors, in the tissue of the epic. The rivalry between Vasishtha the Brahmin and Vishwamitra, the king who becomes an ascetic for the accession of superior powers, the legend of Nahusha who levied taxes on the ascetics and compelled them to do manual labour, are such echoes. When the Pandavas were in sore straits, their mother Kunti recalls the story of queen Vidula, who turned angrily on her son Sanjaya for trying to withdraw from a hopeless battle. "Flare up like a torch of Tinduka wood, though it be but for a moment, but smoulder not like a fire of chaff just to prolong life. That man whose deeds do not



form the subject of tales of wonder, serves but to increase the great heap, he is neither man nor woman." Even Duryodhana is redeemed by the courage with which he confronts the rout of all his hopes of empire and his own imminent death. "There is no sorrow for me that my head was kicked by Bhima with his foot. In a moment, crows and vultures are going to place their feet on my head. I die the death which is dear to true Kshatriyas who follow their own Dharma. Who can have a more glorious end than myself?" If asceticism claimed that withdrawal from the world was the only way to salvation, the warrior class made the counter-claim that death in the field also led to heaven. Duryodhana is convinced that he shall go to heaven. Karna also claims: "I shall win great renown in this world and I shall have access to the highest heaven." A parallel to these sentiments is found in one of the finest products of European chivalry, the *Song of Roland*. "Fated is it certainly that we should all perish ere long, and it may be that we should never more behold the sunrise. But of one thing I can stand surety for you. To you shall be accorded the blessed realms of heaven. There you shall have your seats among the saints."<sup>69</sup>

There is a strange but significant inversion of the roles of two characters in the epic. Drona is a Brahmin, but he becomes the generalissimo of the Kuru hosts. Bhishma becomes the preceptor and discourses on ethics and statecraft in two long sections (the Santi and Anusasana Parvas) of the epic. But he is a Kshatriya, in fact the greatest warrior of the day. The account of his end is in the highest heroic vein. The fallen hero needs a rest for his head. Immediately several princes rush to bring soft pillows, none of which Bhishma would accept. He glances meaningly at Arjuna who shoots three arrows into the ground and the veteran contentedly rests his head on their sharp points, the only worthy headrest for a dying hero. He asks for water, but rejects the vessels brought by the princes. Arjuna again sends an arrow deep into the earth and raises a jet of pure cool water from far below. It is this warrior, Bhishma, to whom is assigned the musing on the most complex problems of social and moral life.

But, as yet, heroic activism remains the ethos of a class, though it is a class with an important function in society, the governance of social life according to the ideals of justice. The movement



has now to modulate to a major key where the ethos of a class will become a philosophy for man. Krishna is the figure through whom Vyasa manages this deepening of meaning. He has two levels of action. In the lower plane, he is like any other character in the story, though one of the most important. In the higher, he is an incarnation, come to guide man in a historical crisis.

As a human character, Krishna emerges as a brilliant statesman from whom no complexity of human character or social situation is hidden. When Vidura tells him that his embassy to the Kurus will be a failure, he replies that he knows it, but he wants the world to realise that he had offered the maximum compromise to avert war. Here is a statesman who has realised the value of mobilising public opinion in his favour. It is his brilliant mind that is at work in every crucial decision taken by others. As a statesman he has to handle all types of forces and he does not hesitate to meet ruse with ruse, deception with deception. He drives implacably forward to realise his aim, which is solving the historical crisis brought about by the arrogant and unjust rule of the Kurus.

He is the kinsman of both Duryodhana and the Pandavas and on the eve of the war he waits to see who comes to him and for what type of assistance. There is a remarkable episode where both Arjuna and Duryodhana arrive simultaneously to canvass the help of Krishna. He pretends to be asleep and they wait for him to wake up. Duryodhana relied on material power and he asks for Krishna's army. He gets it. The demoniac forces of the world also derive their power from the same ultimate source, although it may at first seem quiescent. But they identify themselves with the lowest plane of the divine manifestation, material energy, and Krishna's hosts, without their leader, cannot prevent the fall of Duryodhana. Arjuna chooses Krishna, without his armies, without even the right to be a combatant. Krishna promises to be his charioteer. The purer forces also derive their power from God, but they do not confuse material strength with the spirit which is its source. God thus becomes the divine guide of Man when he is ready to accept Him as such.

The evolving world is a strand woven by many types of unfolding energies. It is moving towards a fulfilment and man has to help in this movement. Withdrawal from action is alienation



from God. On the eve of the battle, Dhritarashtra sends a message to the effect that Krishna should stop this fratricidal war and it would be better for the Pandavas to go into exile or live even by begging than to proceed to mutual slaughter. Krishna replies that there can be no withdrawal from duty, from work. "The wind blows through work. Causing day and night, through work, the sleepless sun rises everyday. The sleepless moon too goes through its phases and the fire enkindled by work burns, doing good to the creatures of the earth. Earth carries this great load and the unwearied rivers carry their waters with speed, satisfying the desire of all beings. The sleepless rain comes down in its time and makes every corner resound." Here is a bold and complete acceptance of the universal process, the dynamical Reality, in preference to the static existence of the withdrawn Absolute. The universe evolves because nature works and man too has his apportioned work. Moral problems arise in this plane but they have to be solved by the highest insight and action resolutely resumed.

Arjuna too was overwhelmed by the thought of fratricide and he is ready to prefer exile and even living by begging as Dhritarashtra had suggested. But he is taught that he has a duty to resist evil and, further, without any personal or ego-centered motives. His real enemy is not the kinsman who has lifted arms against him and against whom he has to wield his weapons. The enemy is within. "Mind is the cause of bondage when it is turned outwards and the cause of release when it is turned inwards. Self is the friend of him by whom the self has been conquered. But the Self shall be, in its enmity, like a true enemy towards him of uncontrolled self." Arjuna's desire to withdraw from the war was really a rationalization. He had not examined his own motives. If he was fighting for empire, his reluctance to fight his kinsmen is understandable, for a dynastic empire is in one sense only an expansion of the in-group attachment expanding from ego, family and clan to a wider horizon. Therefore a dynastic empire to be won by the slaughter of one's kinsmen might have looked repugnant. But he was shown that he had to fight against evil without any thought of the consequences to himself. He might lose his life or win an empire. These were not relevant considerations. He does win an empire but that empire will go the way of all



empires. Other generations will come and they too will have to fight the great Maha Bharata war—within their hearts, against their own weaknesses and misgivings. There is no one victory which can stabilize all future. For such stabilization may be a petrification, which can offer no challenge to the spirit of man. Historical crises will recur. But since historical existence is the fulfilment of God's purpose, His program, His spirit will descend as incarnations again and again. When Arjuna was dazed by the passing away of Krishna, Vyasa tells him that Krishna left the world because his present mission was complete. But the Gita carries the august promise that whenever a moral crisis emerges in history, he shall come back to aid the sorely tried spirit of man. That is why practical idealists have always been looked upon in India with a semi-religious reverence. Millions of copies of a picture of Gandhi with this specific quotation from the Gita below have found their way into Indian homes.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

## Epic Legends

1. *Hindu Puranas*

POETIC CREATIVITY, which gave us the epic histories, also acted at a lower level of tension to yield a great mass of epic legends or Puranas. In all they contain about four hundred thousand verses and subsequent analysis classified them into eighteen Maha (Major) Puranas and eighteen Upa (Minor) Puranas. Etymologically, Purana means that which lives from ancient times. Amara Simha in the fifth century emphasized five main characteristics of this form. The narrative should include the account of creation, dissolution and re-creation, divine genealogies, ages of mankind, and genealogies of kings. A variant reading has world geography in place of the last feature. But this short list cannot exhaust the wide range of features of these literary miscellanies. They were essentially the scriptures of the laity. The stories recall the early myths and sagas of the other nations, but a very important difference is the pervasive didactic purpose. Jainism and Buddhism also generated their cycles of legends.

A perceptive assumption of Puranic cosmogony is the doctrine of the cycles of eons. The universe is created and dissolved in an endless series. Worlds are breathed forth from the Brahman and run a regular course through a series of world ages forming a Kalpa. Each Kalpa consists of many Maha Yugas or great cycles and each Maha Yuga consists of four ages of mankind, the Krita, Treta, Dwapara, and Kali Yugas. The scale of duration given to these cycles is enormous and need be interpreted only as emphasizing the conviction that creation renews itself in vast cycles over infinite time. Far more important is the assignation of a specific culture-mentality to each age of mankind. The great scheme by which Pitrim Sorokin<sup>1</sup> systematised world history as a recurring cycle of ideational, idealistic and sensate cultures is anticipated here, and with the greatest definition and clarity. The Kali Yuga is our own age, the last phase of a great cycle in which, as the *Vishnu Purana* puts it, "the rights of men will be confused,



no property is safe, no joy and no prosperity is lasting."<sup>2</sup> It is the age of self-centred and self-defeating hedonism.

The Puranas teach the doctrine of man's responsibility. The issue of effort versus fatality is squarely confronted in the *Matsya Purana*<sup>3</sup> and a clear answer is given after a subtle analysis. Time is only the matrix of action. It is pure duration, a chronological dimension where action can unfold. It is not the womb of a dark fatality. It is not moving irresistibly towards any sombre precipice. Nevertheless, there is a pressure which can develop in the context of events that can hamper man. But if this pressure looks like the shadow of fate at first sight, on further study it will be seen to be the creation of the past actions of man himself. The germ of the act may be the volition of the mind, but its consequences trail out into the external world and alter its pattern and it is this changed pattern which will confront man later. But here he is confronting only something generated by his own personality, not an ominous fate. About the issue whether, even if the new situation is one's own creation, it can become so formidable as to leave no room for creative effort now, the text is radiantly but soberly optimistic. It is always possible to win by effort. Human initiative can always be effective and the text exhorts man to rise again after every fall.

The body is the instrument of action and therefore its sacredness is emphasized. The morbid hatred of the flesh which cast a sombre shadow over the Maitrayana Upanishad is completely exorcised. The *Garuda Purana*<sup>4</sup> has a glowing passage in this respect. The destroyed house and village can be built again. Lost wealth can be recovered. But lost life is irrecoverable. It is therefore essential to preserve the vital powers in a state of health with the sensory and motor organs in full efficiency. The body is the instrument of moral action. It is therefore something holy. The Purana goes on to clarify the principles of Ayurveda or the science of health.

The order of the householder is defended against the excessive development of the ascetic outlook. Brahma orders Narada to marry and bring up a family. When the latter insists that he wants to become an ascetic, he is cursed. With poetic justice, the man who turned away from the normal impulses is condemned to become a rake who will be a slave to the excessive and unbalanced



development of the libidinal impulses.<sup>5</sup>

Theistic cults develop as strong movements during this period and occasionally harden into sectarianism. The *Siva Purana* extols Siva at the expense of Brahma, the creator, and Vishnu, the preserver. Due to the dominance of Kali, a personification of the turbulent id, even Brahma and Vishnu get involved in a violent conflict. At the critical moment a great glowing pillar suddenly appears between them. Intrigued, the contestants try to explore this manifestation. Vishnu becomes a boar and tries to go down to the base of the pillar. But he cannot go far enough and returns. Brahma soars upward in the form of a swan, but cannot reach the terminal of the height. A flower from the diadem of Siva far above flutters down and Brahma seizes it and claims that he had seen the head of the great pillar. For uttering this lie, Siva curses him and ordains that there shall be no temple to the worship of Brahma.<sup>6</sup> The *Devi Bhagavata* similarly extols the creative energy of godhead personified as the great mother-goddess, Nature.<sup>7</sup>

But all sectarianism disappears at that deeper level where the personal god is realised as a symbol and the cult disappears in the catholicism of the perceptive mind. In the *Brahma Purana*,<sup>8</sup> Vishnu teaches Markandeya that he is identical with Siva. The *Vayu Purana*<sup>9</sup> says that he who affirms superiority and inferiority among gods is a sinner and that he who realizes their oneness is the man of true knowledge. "Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesvara, though three in form, are one entity. There is no difference among the three except that of attributes."<sup>10</sup> The *Vishnu Purana* stresses the identity of Vishnu and Siva and of their respective consorts in popular mythology, Lakshmi and Gouri. "God, though one, assumes the three forms of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva for the creation, preservation and dissolution of the world respectively."<sup>11</sup> Each of the functions of creation, preservation and dissolution implies and contains the others in a latent form. A perceptive imagery describes Vishnu, the preserver, as the arrow of Siva, the destroyer, and Siva, in turn, as Krishna's flute.<sup>12</sup> The doctrine of incarnation, by which God takes on flesh to intervene at the nodal points of history, preserved the basic unity of the different divine manifestations while furnishing a variety of personalisations with a differential appeal to differing temperaments.



The personalised God-Man arouses a warmer response in the human heart and by sublimating the emotions eliminates the necessity to suppress the emotional life. This truth is brought out with quaint humour in the story of the temptation of the ascetics of the Deodar Forest, who were seeking salvation through the dead routine of rituals, by Siva and Vishnu. Vishnu takes the form of a beautiful woman and when the couple enters the retreat, the ascetics fall in love with Vishnu, and all the women with Siva.<sup>13</sup>

It is in the *Bhagavata Purana*,<sup>14</sup> however, that the way of love finds the most exalted and most poetic treatment. The story of the dalliance of Krishna with the cowherd maidens of Gokul is spun by Vyasa out of the loveliest material that nature can furnish, moonlight on the river, the scented breath of the night breeze flowing from the heart of the woods and the call of Krishna's flute heard by the maidens even in their sleep. Since, throughout the history of literature, scholars have tried to read allegorical meanings into older material which was completely innocent of any such intention, we may be tempted to accept this sequence only as a pastoral romance and reject it as an allegory where Krishna stands for the Divine Lover whom the human souls yearn to embrace. Such an over-cautious attitude, healthy elsewhere, will lead us astray here, for the narrative very clearly shows that the allegory is intentional and not something imposed in retrospect. "The rains then set in. Clouds hid the moon, even as egoism hides the soul. Rain poured down like blessings. The fresh water, like the service of the Lord, produced a fresh richness and beauty in all. Then autumn came. Sky and water became transparent like minds in meditation, the mire of the roads slowly disappeared like the false notions of the ignorant. The sea was still like a self-realised soul. The moon shone like true knowledge." This repetition of imagery with a deeper resonance, where the detail in nature is used to suggest a state of the spirit, prepares the way for the entry of the flute, pouring out as much longing as its listeners in the hushed hamlet felt for its player. "Wearing yellow silk, with a peacock feather on his head and a garland of woodland blossoms, Krishna played his flute in the heart of the woods. The magic music fell on the ears of the cowherd lasses who became jealous of the flute that drank the



sweet breath from the ruby lips of the Lord. Cows stood still, drinking in the music of the flute with upturned ears. Calves stood still, leaving their mothers' udder. The sages sat, like the still birds on the boughs, listening in silence to those strains. The Yamuna eddied all the more and appeared to stretch her waves like arms to clasp the feet of the Lord."<sup>15</sup> The human soul is feminine to God, the eternal male. This is brought out in a story where Narada undergoes a strange transformation, much to his own surprise. The sage seeks the help of Brinda in participating in the Orphic mystery of Vrindavan. She asks him to take a dip in the lake. He suddenly finds himself transformed into a maiden. And it is as a maiden going to her lover, like an Indian St. John of the Cross, that he enters the presence of the Lord.<sup>16</sup>

The devotional path may be a way of ecstasy, but it is not an enervating cult. Krishna recommends it as only one of the many paths, in his instruction of Uddhava. "The path of knowledge is for those who are weary of life. Those who have yet desires should pursue the path of sublimation through works. And for those who are not completely indifferent nor too much attached, the devotional path bears fruit . . . Do then your acts, but in a spirit of dedication to Me. In your pursuit of meritorious duty, material gain or emotional gratification, take your stand in Me. With the association of the good and the pure you will soon reach Me through devotion."

But, as far as the way of the world is concerned, its cyclical course of growth and decay cannot be arrested, just as the termination of the individual's life cannot be indefinitely prolonged. This is brought out with profound poignancy towards the close of the *Bhagavata*. "The clan in which the incarnation of Krishna had manifested Himself became elated with pride and it became necessary for the Lord to remove them before he himself departed from this world." Evil portents appeared at Dwaraka, the new city by the sea of the Yadava clan, and Krishna advised his people to leave Dwaraka and go to Prabhasa. There the Yadavas indulged in heavy drinking, quarrelled and fought each other to the last man. When evil portents appeared at Dwaraka, Uddhava, the cousin and minister of Krishna, approaches him with troubled mind and Krishna's counsel at this critical hour is as precious as his counsel to Arjuna in the Maha Bharata at the



“existential” moment when large armies are about to join in battle. This section of the *Bhagavata Purana* has therefore been called *Uddhava Gita*. If Krishna asks men to dedicate themselves to him, it is because the self of man is identical with the divine reality of which he is the incarnation and therefore dedication to him is the same as dedication to the self in every man. “With senses and mind under control, see the world within your heart and your Self in Me, the Over-Lord. The wise exalt themselves by their own self-endeavour. The Self is the greatest teacher.” But Vyasa is not prepared to accept that the human personality must live in isolation from the world. The inner vision can see in every detail of nature a rich intimation. “Learn from these objects of nature. Though trampled on by all, be firm in your adversity like this very earth. From these mountains, which bear their minerals and other resources for the weal of the world, learn that you should live for others and not for yourself. Like wind, you should be able to pass through untouched. Pervasive, touching everything, yet itself untouched, the ether is indeed the best example of the Yogi. You should be limpid, pure, purifying, pleasing and refreshing like water; effulgent with the lustre of knowledge like fire, reducing to ashes all impurity. Like the sea, deep and unfathomable, neither swell up by what flows into you nor get exhausted by what is taken from you. Like a bee, take in little by little, and from good and bad, extract the essence even as the bee does the honey.”

The ideal of living for others is exalted in many stories. King Vipaschit wins heaven by his meritorious life, but desires to visit hell out of curiosity. Immediately he enters that sombre abode, the inmates seem to forget their pain. At the king's amazed question, the servant of Yama, the god of death, gives him the explanation that, from the good works of a pious man, a refreshing breath is wafted towards the inhabitants of hell and alleviates their torments. Then the king takes this great decision. “Not in heaven does man find such bliss as when he can give refreshment to beings in torment. If through my presence the torture of these unfortunate beings is alleviated I choose to stay here, firm and irremovable like a pillar.”<sup>17</sup>

The material in the Puranas is not homogeneous and not all of it is of the same high quality. Pardonable exaggerations are \*



often indulged in to stress the importance of rituals. There is the story of a Brahmin youth who became a gambler and a rake and was expelled from home. One day, feeling very hungry, he lies in wait at a Siva temple and when the priests leave, he tears up his garments to make wicks, lights the lamps and starts to eat the offerings placed before the idol. He is found out, beaten up and collapses. But the messengers of Yama who arrive to take him to hell are chased away by the attendants of Siva. He gets divine protection because it happened to be a Siva Ratri or Holy Night of Siva, when lamps should burn throughout the night. The youth had lit the lamps by tearing up his garments, even though it was for stealing food.<sup>18</sup>

As in medieval Christian tradition, scholarship finds it an exciting adventure to seek novel interpretations of old myths and symbols. For instance, why does Siva wear the moon as a head ornament? One explanation goes back to the legend of the churning of the primeval ocean of milk by the gods and demons. This may stand for the play of inertia and energy, positive and negative forces, ego-centric impulse and idealism, in the evolution of the universe. For, from the churned sea rise the Parijata tree and the cow Surabhi, the symbols of agricultural civilization and Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity. From the eddying sea also arise the elixir of life and the most destructive poison. To save the world from the vapours of the poison, Siva drinks it and it stays in his throat safely, staining it blue. The moon also floated up from the churned sea and Siva wore the cooling orb to offset the scalding venom. But the *Skanda Purana* offers another explanation. The moon, steadily growing from a sickle to an orb and again declining, is the symbol of time. God wears time, thus making it the vehicle of a fulfilment, a creative process fulfilling His purpose.

Though Puranic lore gives currency to popular conceptions of hell and heaven, it is also stressed that these are really states of the personality of man and should be understood as the stain of guilt and sin and the beatitude of virtue.<sup>19</sup> The real inwardness of virtue and the concealed persistence of egoism in the most generous behaviour are brought out in the story of Mahabali, the liberal but proud ruler of the three worlds from whom God, in the guise of a dwarf, begs three feet of land. When the prayer is



granted, the dwarf grows to fill earth and sky and his three steps exhaust the world so that the last step is on the crowned head, pushing the king down to Hades. Here the legend has the germ of great drama with characterization in depth. For Sukra, the preceptor of the king, warns him beforehand that the dwarf is the deity in disguise and is arriving with no innocent or kindly intention. But the king replies that if God comes to beg of him something, it is a homage to his liberality and the consequences do not matter.<sup>20</sup>

Sensitive descriptions of nature are found in the Puranas. The *Vamana Purana* paints a miniature spring landscape. "As spring approached, the Palasa trees, aflame with their crimson blossoms that left no leaf visible, made the entire place look bright. The Nipa trees, with their topmost branches crowned with a profusion of flowers, looked like the attendants of a royal household standing loaded with gifts in recognition of their services. The Vetas plants with finger-shaped flowers seemed to attract attention to themselves as if in denial of their equals existing anywhere on earth."<sup>21</sup> But it is in the *Bhagavata* that the beauty of nature is responded to with lyrical fervour. In a few sensitive touches, we see the transformation of earth and sky just before Krishna's birth. "Then came the most glorious of times, possessing every excellence. The quarters cleared and in the sky appeared multitudes of bright stars. Cities, villages and hamlets on the earth were full of auspiciousness. Rivers were transparent in their waters, and lakes beautiful with lotuses. The sylvan groves were resonant with the hum of bees and birds in the clusters of flowers. The wind blew pleasant, fragrant and pure. And softly the clouds rumbled in accompaniment to the ocean."<sup>22</sup> In the *Brahma Purana*, this love of nature becomes transformed into a lyrical homage to the landscape of the entire country, to the sacred earth of India.

Remarkable scientific insights are also found buried in these very heterogeneous literary miscellanies. For instance, in the *Vishnu Purana*, we find the rejection of geocentrism, the view that the earth is the centre of the solar system. Instead, the sun is affirmed as the pivot of the system. There is a remarkable further insight also here. The movement of the planets is stated to impart a motion to the pivotal sun also. Though heliocentrism



is not a new discovery in Western science, the insight that the system as a whole, and not only the peripheral planets, is wheeling slowly through space is recent and this seems to have been anticipated in the *Vishnu Purana*.<sup>23</sup>

Lastly, we find in the Puranas an affirmation of the status of art. The *Vishnu Purana* says in a memorable passage: "Poetry and all literary creations, as also music, are but aspects of the Lord in His form as Sound."<sup>24</sup> The *Agni Purana* says: "If Sastra (science) Itihasa (history) and popular culture, all three combine, it becomes a Kavya (literary creation)." The same Purana gives an extended analysis of the psychology of aesthetic creation and experience.<sup>25</sup>

## II. Buddhist Legends

The Puranic form made it an excellent vehicle for the instruction of the laity through fable and parable. Therefore, a vast mass of such material grew up in the Buddhist tradition also. The earlier literature is in Pali, but in the later phase Sanskrit came to be used to an increasing extent. When men of high literary ability handled the form, the didactic narrative or Purana became a purely literary creation or Kavya. Most of this literature is in Sanskrit prose interspersed with verse passages in mixed Sanskrit. For their material they drew heavily on the legends that had already taken form in Pali.

\* In this literature, we see Buddhism rapidly transforming itself into a theistic religion. The popular imagination is caught by the many miracles wrought by the Buddha. In the *Lalita Vistara*, which probably belongs to the first century A.D., we find many stories about the boyhood of the Buddha. The statues fall down before the child when he visits the temple. To the teacher who comes to instruct him, the omniscient boy explains sixty-four different kinds of writings including those of the Chinese and Huns.<sup>26</sup> The poor school-master is overwhelmed and falls to the ground. A god raises him and calms him by saying that the Bodhisattva, being omniscient and having no need to learn anything, yet, following the course of the world, has come to school. (The lot of the school-master has always been hard). The *Maha Vastu*<sup>27</sup> is also full of such miracles. In one incarnation,



the Bodhisattva attains to such miraculous powers as a hermit that he can touch the sun and moon with his hands. In the true manner of the Puranas, this work begins with a genealogy of the line of kings in which the Buddha was born and the line goes back to the beginning of creation itself.

Moving stories of devotion are given in many of these works. The *Avadana Sataka*,<sup>28</sup> which was translated into Chinese in the first half of the third century and may probably belong to the second century, narrates the story of a poor girl who anointed the feet of the Buddha with sandalwood ointment. In consequence of this, the whole town is filled with the perfume of sandalwood. A later collection, the *Divyavadana*,<sup>29</sup> gives us the dramatic episode of the conversion of Mara, the Lucifer of Buddhism, by the virtuous Upagupta. The idea, ingenious in itself, is developed with imagination. Mara is converted and Upagupta, who desires to see with his eyes the Buddha long since dead, asks Mara to appear before him in the Buddha's form. Mara obeys and the devotee forgets that it is an apparition and not reality, and overwhelmed by ecstasy, falls down in worship. Stories of martyrs also begin to emerge. The *Avadana Sataka* relates the story of Srimati, wife of King Bimbisara, who used to pay daily homage to the relics of the Buddha which the King had enclosed in a mound for worship by the ladies of his harem. But Bimbisara is killed by his son Ajata Satru. The new king is hostile to Buddhism and forbids such homage on pain of death. Srimati disobeys, and slain by the king's order, is born again in the world of the gods.

The concept of the Buddha as the great idealist, who sacrificed salvation for abiding with mankind to alleviate their misery, is the recurring theme of this literature. The *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra*,<sup>30</sup> which was written in 200 A.D. or earlier and was translated into Chinese and Japanese, pays its homage to the saviour thus: "Even as a mighty rain-cloud gathers, and waters and refreshes by its moisture all the grasses, herbs and trees, even as the latter absorb the moisture of the earth and blossom forth in renewed vigour, so the Buddha appears in the world and refreshes all things living, bringing them blessed repose. Again, even as the sun and moon send down their rays equally all over the world, on the good and the bad, on the exalted and the lowly,



so the preaching of the Buddha is for all the world alike." This catholicity attempts to synthesize the three Buddhist systems, just as the Gita synthesizes the various approaches to salvation. The three doctrines of the Pratyeka Buddhas, who are concerned only with their individual salvation, of the monastic order of disciples, and of the saviour, are essentially the same. In reality it is only by the mercy of the Buddha that all of them alike attain to enlightenment. The *Saddharma Pundarika* illustrates this through a parable. A ruined house catches fire; the children are inside and the father outside. There is no time for the father to rescue them one by one. So he calls out to them that he has all sorts of beautiful toys for them, little bullock-carts, goat-carts and antelope-carts, outside. The children come to him running and ask for the toys. But since he is a rich man, he gives them beautiful toys much better than the ones he had promised. Who can accuse the father of deception because he promised inferior presents and gave the most splendid kind? Even so does the Buddha with men. By the promise of three "Vehicles" he lures them away from the burning, ruined house of the world and gives them the most precious vehicle.

Infinite is the compassion of the Buddha. The *Kalpana Manditika* (also known as the *Sutralamkara*) written by Kumaralata, who lived towards the end of the second century, gives this story. A man seeks admission to the orders but the elder, Sariputra, rejects him because he has not done the slightest good in any of his existences throughout eons. But the weeping man is found by the Buddha and taken into the monastery. Once, in a former birth, while gathering firewood in the forests, he had been attacked by a tiger and had cried out in terror, "Honour to the Buddha!" The involuntary cry is enough to entitle him to salvation. The *Avadana Sataka* gives this story. In one of his lives, the Bodhisattva offends his mother and has to endure the punishment of bearing on his head a wheel of red hot iron for sixty thousand years, until another who has committed a like sin comes to relieve him of his burden. But the Bodhisattva does not want anyone else to undergo this torture and resolves that he will himself endure the pain for all eternity. He is rewarded forthwith by the disappearance of the wheel.

In texts like the *Avalokitesvara Guna Karanda Vyuha* and the



*Sukhavati Vyuha* which may belong to the fourth or fifth century, we find the development of the concept of the Buddhist paradise presided over by Avalokitesvara or Amitabha. The visualization of Sukhavati or the blessed realm is very concrete. Delightful rivers yield pleasant, sweet water and the rippling of the water is the most glorious music. Jewel trees with many coloured blossoms grow there and the land is filled with a sweet fragrance.

Of far greater literary merit are the warmly human episodes found scattered in this literature. One of the finest stories is that of Prakriti, the Chandala (untouchable) girl, narrated in the *Divyavadana*. One day she was fetching water from the well, when Ananda, the Buddha's disciple, feeling thirsty after his rounds for begging alms, comes across her and asks for water. She tells him that she is an untouchable. But Ananda replies that he is not concerned about her caste. The girl falls deeply in love with the monk and her mother, who is a great sorceress, summons Ananda to their abode with her power. But at the moment of the greatest danger, Ananda bursts into tears and prays to the Buddha. The sorceress tells her daughter that she is powerless against the Buddha. But the girl is still hopelessly in love with Ananda and follows him daily as he goes on his rounds. The Buddha comes to the rescue again and, with the greatest delicacy, he is able to persuade her to join the order as a nun. The admission of an untouchable excites the citizens, who are pacified by the Buddha with a story. Trisanku, a Chandala chief, wanted to marry his very learned son Sardulakarna to the daughter of a proud Brahmin who hotly rejected the suggestion. In the dramatic dialogue that follows, Trisanku becomes the spokesman of the intense democratic faith of Buddhism and the marriage finally takes place. After the narration of the story, the Buddha reveals that Trisanku was himself in a former birth, the Chandala youth was Ananda and Prakriti was the daughter of the Brahmin. A poignant story is that of the son of Asoka whose step-mother succeeds in poisoning Asoka's mind against him and in having him blinded without his permitting himself either hate or reproach.

As in the case of the Hindu Puranas, we see the Buddhist stream also often consciously modelling itself on the style and idiom of the Kavya or the literary epic. The *Suvarna Prabhasa*



*Sutra* goes even for the flamboyant rhetoric that is typical of the self-conscious literary craftsman. A Brahmin begs for a relic of the Buddha, even though it might not be bigger than a grain of mustard, but the Lichhavi prince turns down the appeal with a flourish. "When flowers will grow in the flood of the Ganges, when crows are red and the date-tree bears mango blossoms, when ocean-going ships will career around upon dry land with sail and mast, when people will make a firm ladder out of a hare's horn whereby to climb heaven, when a mouse will climb up this ladder and having eaten up the moon, will run around the other constellations, then there will be a relic."<sup>31</sup> Asvaghosha's *Buddha Charita* is a full-fledged Kavya and we shall take it up later. But echoes of its rhetorical phrasings are heard in the *Divyavadana* in passages like this. "The flames of desire, kindled by sorrow, in the minds of those full of longing were extinguished by the torrents of his generosity, made beautiful by his courtesy."

\* The influence of Asvaghosha is most evident in the *Jataka Mala* of Arya Sura,<sup>32</sup> who belongs to the third or fourth century. The literary qualities of this work are of such a high order that we wonder whether it should be regarded as a Purana or Kavya and if we deal with it in this section it is merely because it draws its theme from the Pali legends about the Buddha. The content is Puranic, but the shaping of the material makes it a literary classic. It contains thirty-four stories about the previous incarnations of the Buddha and was translated into Chinese in the fifth century.

It is clear even to the casual reader that Arya Sura is not interested merely in the skeletal frame of the story but in investing it with supple, sensuous, poetic tissue. In one incarnation the Bodhisattva was a swan and he offered himself in the place of another that was caught by a fowler. The story gives Arya Sura an opportunity to build up an evocative picture of the swan lake. "Adorned by the tribe of swans, who by their sound would call to mind the soft tinkling of the anklets of maidens, that lake was splendid. When in a mass, the swans resembled a moving grove of white lotuses. When dispersed in small groups, they made the lake surpass even the beauty of a sky embellished with scattered banks of clouds. Near the shore its beauty was enhanced by its many water-lilies, sleepless through the gentle touch of



the moonbeams, which made them resemble patches of moonshine piercing through the foliage. There the pollen of lotuses and water-lilies, conveyed by the finger-like waves, would embroider its shore as if with gold filigree. The limpid and unruffled water was so transparent as to show the sharp contours and fair hues of its fish, no less conspicuous while swimming beneath the surface than they would have been, if moving in the sky."

In another story, there is a prolonged drought and the fish in the dry ponds face death. The Bodhisattva sends rain to save them. Magnificent is the coming of the rain. "Like the shadows of the mountains projected in the mirror of the sky, the black clouds appeared, closing the horizon to the vision and filling the land with darkness. Then the clouds let loose streams of rain, which fell down like pearls loosened from their shells. The dust subsided and the pungent smell of the moistened, steaming earth spread itself, on the wings of the wind which accompanied the thunder shower." A far greater storm fills the skies in the story where the Bodhisattva rescues sailors caught on the high seas. "Suddenly the sea took on a terrible aspect. A violent gale arose, causing a fearful roar of the waters, lashing their surface so that they were covered with foam scattered by their breaking billows. The whole sea was brought up in commotion from its very bottom. Shaken by the hurricane, the immense masses of water were stirred up and rolled with terrible rapidity. Like many-headed hissing serpents, clouds of a bluish black colour with their flame-tongues of lightnings obstructed the path of the sun and without interruption produced the terrible noise of their thunder. With sunset, the darkness, growing, as it were, more concrete, enveloped the entire scene. Smitten by the rain-darts the sea rose up, as if in rage, and the poor ship tossed wildly." In yet another story, the Bodhisattva extinguishes a forest fire to save the trapped fledglings. "The fire, excited by the whirling of the wind, that seemed to induce it to perform manifold figures of orgiastic dance, agitated its wide-outstretched flame-arms, leaped up, shaking its dishevelled smoke-hair, and crackled. It jumped, as if in wrath, on the grasses, which, trembling under the violent touch of the fierce wind, seemed to take to flight; and covering them with its glittering sparks, burnt them. It seemed as if the forest itself, with its crowds of birds flying about terror-stricken, with its



terrified quadrupeds fleeing on all sides, with the thick smoke which enveloped it, and with the sharp noise of the fire's crackling, was loudly groaning with pain." In one story, the Bodhisattva offered himself as food for a starving tigress. Very powerful is the description of the animal tormented by hunger. "Now, below in a cavern of the mountain, he beheld a young tigress that could scarcely move from the place, her strength being exhausted by the labour of whelping. Her sunken eyes and emaciated belly betokened her hunger, and she was regarding her own offspring as food, who, thirsting for the milk of her udders, had come near her, trusting their mother and fearless; but she brawled at them, as if they were strange to her, with prolonged harsh roarings."

One of the most poignant tales elaborated by Arya Sura is that of the prince Visvantara. Because he gave away everything, he was found unfit to be a ruler and sent to the forest. His wife comforts him. "The water-carrying brooks, overhung by natural bowers of perpetually renewed beauty, varying according to the succession of the seasons, will delight you in the forest. During nights, the beauty of the reflection of the stars in the water will be surpassed by the laughing lustre of the water-lilies caressed by the beams of their lover, the Moon-God." She also accompanies him to the forest. "It was encircled as with a girdle by a river of pure blue water, and the wind was agreeable there, fragrant with its load of pollen." But misfortune chases the prince even in this quiet retreat. An ascetic comes along and begs him to give him his two children to be his attendants. The elder boy is plunged in sorrow, not because he is going into servitude, but because he realises what a blow it will be to his mother. "How will our mother take the shock, when, coming back with the many roots and fruits she has gathered in the forest for us, she finds the hermitage empty? Here, father, are our toy horses, elephants and chariots. Half of them you must give to mother, so that she may forget her grief." The mother returns, but the children do not run forth to greet her as usual. She is filled with misgivings. "Perhaps they have fallen asleep and are slumbering, tired with playing. Or have they got lost in the woods? Or have they hidden themselves out of petulance, being displeased that I took so long in returning home? . . . But why do not yonder birds warble? Are they struck dumb because they witnessed some mis-



chief done to the children? Can it be that may darlings have been carried away by this turbulent stream?" In the end all ends happily. The children are returned by the ascetic who was Sakra (Indra) in disguise and the kingdom is also returned to the prince. In the *Jataka Mala*, the traditional legend becomes a full-fledged literary classic.

### III. Jain Legends

Though the canonical literature of Jainism grew up first in Prakrit dialects like Magadhi and Maharashtri, Sanskrit came to be the medium later, from about the eighth century, till the rise of the modern Indian languages when the Jains turned to these new vernaculars. Throughout the centuries, Jainism has produced scholars of great distinction. One interesting feature of the Jain literary output is the fact that the Hindu Itihasas and Puranas were recast in Jain versions to popularize their doctrines. Vimala had produced a Jain version of the Ramayana in Jaina Maharashtri within about three centuries of Mahavira's times. This became the model of many Sanskrit versions. Thus, in the seventh century, Ravi Sena wrote his *Padma Purana*. The story follows the Ramayana with only minor changes. Padma is Rama; Lava and Kusa, the sons of Rama, become Lavana and Ankusa; the monkey soldiery is replaced by an army of Vidyadharas. Sermons are freely inserted and a favourite theme is non-violence. The dreadful consequences of killing, and of eating flesh are dwelt upon at great length and there is a vivid description of the hells where such sinners at last find themselves. The Ramayana story is also included in the *Maha Purana*<sup>33</sup> written by Jina Sena and Guna Bhadra in the ninth century. The work consists of legendary biographies of sixty-three great men. The great Jain polymath of the twelfth century, Hema Chandra, also wrote his version of the lives of sixty-three great men, *Trisasti Salaka Purusha Charita*, and the seventh book of the work is called *Jaina Ramayana*. Hema Chandra was not only a schoolman, but a great literary craftsman as well. There are significant modifications, especially in characterization, in his version. Rama is less of an incarnation and Ravana less of a villain here. Kaikeyi, the mother of Bharata, is depicted more graciously. When Bharata rejects the throne



she had obtained for him by intrigue, she repents, accompanies Bharata in the search for Rama, overwhelms Rama with tear-stained kisses and implores him to come back. Jain versions of the Ramayana continued to emerge in the subsequent centuries also. Likewise, the Maha Bharata story was given a Jain colouring in Jina Sena's *Hari Vamsa Purana* of the eighth century, Deva Prabha's *Pandava Charita* of about 1200, and the *Hari Vamsa* of Sakala Kirti and Jina Dasa in the fifteenth century.

The Jains recognise a line of twenty-four teachers and there are numerous compositions on the lives of each of them, pride of place being obtained by Parsva Natha, the twenty-third and Maha Vira, the twenty-fourth and last apostle. Hema Chandra's life of Maha Vira<sup>34</sup> forms the tenth book of his *Lives of Sixty-Three Eminent Men*. Many compositions have as their themes legends about the places of pilgrimages. An example is the work written by Dhanesvara about 1100 glorifying the sacred mountain Satrunjaya. Gnostic utterances are scattered throughout this literature and not all of them deal with the way of ultimate liberation, for many of them give secular guidance too. The following examples are from Bhava Deva Suri's *Parsva Natha Charitra* of the thirteenth century: "It is better for a man to be cast into a dungeon, better to wander in strange lands, better to live in hell—than to have two wives . . . . Better is death, better to beg, better to serve one's enemies, if one meets with ill luck through the waywardness of fortune—than to seek help from relatives . . . . The wise ones know how much sand there is in the bed of the Ganges, and how much water in the ocean; they know the dimensions of a great mountain—but the thoughts of a woman they cannot fathom."<sup>35</sup>

Many of the stories show that folk-lore has been absorbed into this literature. There is a giant of a fellow who figures in the *Satrunjaya Mahatmya* of Dhanesvara. He is a thief and a good-for-nothing, but a keen adventurer. Once, a ship on which he is sailing overseas runs aground in mid-ocean on a coral reef. A parrot indicates a way of rescue. One of them must be prepared to die, swim to the mountain across the lagoon and startle up a great flock of huge birds residing there. The turbulence of air will waft the ship into deep water again. Bhima, the giant, undertakes this and saves the ship. But now he is stranded on



the mountain. The parrot comes to the help again. He is to cast himself into the ocean, allow himself to be swallowed by a fish and thrown ashore. This takes place and he lands in Ceylon. Many such adventures follow, and he even acquires a kingdom. But at last he becomes wearied of all this and withdraws to live as a hermit in the Satrunjaya hill.

The doctrine of rebirth comes in handy for swelling the narrative with the previous incarnations of the various holy men of Jainism. But it cannot be said that the narratives have the poetic qualities of the stories about the lives of the Bodhisattva. Bhava Deva Suri's *Parsva Natha Charitra* relates the story of Marubhuti and Kamatha, the sons of a court priest. Marubhuti hears a pious sermon and becomes an ascetic. Kamatha commits adultery with the neglected wife of his brother, is denounced by him and punished by the king. Kamatha kills his brother in revenge. This motif is repeated through many lives, for Marubhuti is born as an elephant and killed by Kamatha who is born as a snake. In the tenth incarnation, Marubhuti becomes Parsva Natha.

Simple themes are often given ornate, extended treatment. The story of Salibhadra which is only an episode in Hema Chandra's *Maha Vira Charita*, becomes an epic, *Salibhadra Charita*, in Dharma Kumara's handling of the story in the thirteenth century. It was further revised by Pradyumna Suri and invested with all the subtleties of ornate poetry. In a former incarnation, Salibhadra was the son of a poor widow, a shepherd boy named Samgama who delighted in giving himself up to pious meditations while tending his flocks. On a festival day he sees every household preparing delicious food and importunes his mother to prepare a festive meal for him too. This is managed with great difficulty. But an ascetic comes along and the boy gives him the food. In consequence of this meritorious deed, Salibhadra is reborn as the son of a millionaire, but in the end he renounces the world to become an ascetic.

In order to highlight the final asceticism, the early life of many of the saints is depicted in the most worldly manner. The story of prince Jivandhara narrated in the *Maha Purana* is an instance. He builds up a huge harem through his irresistible magnetism. He wins one princess through his skill in playing the lute, another



by winning a contest in archery. He saves a princess who has been bitten by a snake and makes her his bride. One princess proves to be a shrew and the taming of the shrew gives occasion for amusing narration.

Occasionally we get a poignant story with dramatic possibilities. The tale of Sthula Bhadra given by Hema Chandra is an instance. Three monks made vows in the presence of their master. The first said he would sit in front of a lion's den throughout the four months of the rainy season. The second said he would sojourn for the same period in front of the hole of a snake, the mere sight of which is fatal. The third said he would sit on a water-wheel throughout the rainy season. Then the monk Sthula Bhadra comes along. He has realised that the control of the mind is a much harder discipline than the mortification of the body. Before he became a monk, he had been the lover of the courtesan, Kosa. He now declares that he will spend four months in her house without violating his vows of celibacy. He not only succeeds in this, but brings about a change of heart in Kosa also. The master acclaims him, and one of the other monks, becoming jealous, undertakes the same test. But Kosa sees through him and he reveals that he cannot succeed in this test. But he is at last brought back to repentance and to the monastic life by Kosa herself, who finally becomes a nun.

The Jain legends do not always have the glowing sentiment and poetic beauty of the Buddhist legends. But we should note that in the Jain tradition also, as in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, the legend shows the tendency to approximate to the secular literary work in style and idiom. Thus, in the story of Jivandhara, there is an annunciation. A being from the heavenly world of the gods descends into the womb of the queen, "just as a beautiful flamingo would descend upon a pleasant lake covered with lotus flowers." She gives birth to the child "as the sky brings forth the moon." It had been prophesied that a rich merchant should give his daughter in marriage to the man at whose coming a miraculous rejuvenation of nature would take place. Jivandhara, in his wanderings, comes to a lovely grove with a Jain temple. All of a sudden, a Champaka tree bursts forth in blossoms, the cuckoos begin to sing, the pond by the temple fills itself with limpid water, the water-lilies unfold their petals, bees approach



in thousands and the doors of the temple fly open of their own accord.

There is also plenty of direct evidence regarding the interaction of legend and literature. The story of the emperor Suvarna Bahu, narrated in the *Parsva Natha Charitra*, not only contains themes from the Shakuntala legend, but actually reveals an acquaintance with Kalidasa's drama on the theme. Vikrama's long poem, *Nemi Duta*, has for its theme the lament of Rajimati when her husband became a monk. The poem is loaded with literary artifice and is an instance of the "completing of verses" much in favour with scholarly litterateurs. The last line of each stanza is taken from Kalidasa's *Megha Duta* (Cloud Messenger) while the first three lines are composed by the poet himself. An earlier work of the same kind is the *Parsvabhyudaya*, a poetical life-story of Parsva Natha, written by Jina Sena in the ninth century. In this poem, the entire *Megha Duta* has been incorporated by inserting one or two lines from Kalidasa's work in each stanza while Jina Sena composed the rest.



## CHAPTER NINE

## Epic Poems

I. *Origins*

ANALYSING THE form of the Kavya or epic poem in retrospect, the *Kavyadarsa*, a treatise on rhetoric of the eighth century, ascribed to Dandin, gave this broad definition. The subject should be taken from old narratives or traditions, not therefore invented. The hero should be noble and valiant. There should be descriptions of towns, oceans, mountains, seasons, the rising and setting of the sun and moon, sport in parks or the sea, drinking, love dalliance, separations, marriages, the birth of progeny, meeting of councils, embassies, campaigns, battles, and the triumph of the hero, though his rival's merits may be exalted. The enumeration has an archaic flavour and the human significance is not transparent when the poetic tissue is thus dissected and laid bare. But the meaning should be clear. The epic poem paints a great fresco of life, of human action straddling a vast landscape and continued over seasons, years and generations, of character in a tense engagement with external circumstances.

The Kavya, thus, is the blossoming of poetic creativity after a long evolution. The poetic sensitiveness was there in the reaction to the beauty of earth and sky, sunset and starlight, in the Vedic lyric. In the panegyric poems of the Vedas, episodes gain narrative substance and become germs of epics. In the dialogue hymns of the Vedas, they quicken into spirited interchanges between personalities. In the gnomic verses, thought comments on life. In the Puranas, this didactic aim is paramount, but the literary tissue is often richly sensuous and poetic. In the epic histories, *Maha Bharata*, and more especially the *Ramayana*, the comment on life does not stand apart, but becomes assimilated into the structure of plot and the suggestive quality of descriptions. The *Ramayana* is the first Kavya where art mirrors life and interprets it in aesthetic, not didactic, terms. Dandin's analysis of the morphology of the Kavya shows how closely the tradition was modelled on the *Ramayana*.



But it is worth while to look around for evidence other than that furnished by the epic histories for the evolution of the Kavya, especially since they are revered as religious compositions while we are now dealing with the secular epic. There is plenty of such evidence and it indicates that the origins go back to considerable antiquity. Tradition ascribes a Kavya, the *Jambavati Jaya*, to Panini who lived in the fourth century B.C. But as the work is not available, it is difficult to say what value should be attached to this tradition, which, besides, seems to be of very late origin. But Patanjali in the second century B.C. gives very interesting material. He refers to a Kavya by Vararuchi and three romances, *Vasava Datta*, *Somanottara* and *Bhaimarathi*. But these have not come down to us. The most interesting material is the forty quotations, mostly metrical. They are fragmentary, but are unmistakably in the style and idiom of the Kavya. Some are gnomic. "Fraught with life, not with venom, are the blows that teachers give. Vice grows by indulgence, virtue prospers by reproof." Some are rhetorical, like this one on the turning of the wheel of fortune: "On his scanty gleanings now lives he, on the occasion of whose birth were given ten thousand kine to the Brahmins who brought the good tidings." A romantic thought flutters by in the reference to a maiden who was dearer to her lord than his life. There is a brooding reverie on the finality of death. "Though day by day he takes his toll in cattle, horses, men and beasts, the god of death is sated never, as a drunkard is never wearied of wine." The metres of the verses are no longer the Vedic metres. They are composed in the verse moulds of the classical Kavya. ✓

Pingala's *Chhandah Sutra*<sup>1</sup> gives more detailed information ✓ about the evolution of the metres. The names of the metres suggest an intimate bond between art and life, lyrical feeling and the world of nature which quickens it. The plant world suggests such names as Manjari, the flower-cluster, and Mala, the garland. The resurgent insect life of spring suggests a name like the Bhramara Vilasita, sportive like the bees. The stateliness of the motion of the elephant and the lithe grace of the movement of the tiger suggest names like Gaja Gati and Sardula Vikridita. The beauty of pure motion, as of streams flowing fast or slow, suggests names like Mandakranta, gliding slowly, Vegavati, of impetuous motion, Druta Vilambita, now fast, now slow. But the majority of the ✱



names has been inspired by the beauty and grace of woman: Manju Bhashini, maiden of charming speech, Charu Hasini, sweetly smiling, Chanchalakshi, maiden of tremulous glances, Kantot-pida, plague of her lovers. Jacobi draws the conclusion from all this evidence that lyrical poetry had established itself on a firm footing even in the pre-Christian centuries.<sup>2</sup> And Weber has pointed that the tradition of the erotic lyric might go back to antiquity, since many specimens of it can be found in the Atharva Veda, just as the religious lyric goes back to the Rig Veda.<sup>3</sup>

\* } The wide cultivation of prose and verse in the Kavya style is indicated by their use in inscriptions, which have been assembled by Fleet<sup>4</sup> and Diskalkar.<sup>5</sup> Buhler has ably discussed their Kavya features and importance in literary history. The Buddhist inscriptions, like the edicts of Asoka, were in Prakrit. The earliest ins-  
 ✓ cription in which Sanskrit is used in preference to the vernacular is the Girnar Rock inscription of about 150 A.D., paying homage to King Rudradaman who restored the Sudarsana Lake. The homage is metrical and it hails the king himself as a great literary craftsman whose writing is adorned by the qualities of simplicity, clearness, sweetness, variety, beauty and the elevation resulting from the use of the poetic idiom. The word for 'adorned' is 'alamkrita' which strongly suggests acquaintance with Alankara Sastra or the science of poetics, on the part of the poet who wrote the panegyric.

✓ The Nasik inscription of about the same date which pays homage to Siri Pulumayi is in Prakrit, not Sanskrit. But it shows unmistakable signs of the influence of the Kavya manner and  
 ✓ style. This ruler of Pratisthana on the Godavari is extolled as a mine of treasures like the Himalayas, the central pillar of the world like the Meru mountain, and like the Mandara mountain, which was used as a churning rod in the legend of the churning of the ocean of milk, he can produce and preserve Lakshmi, the personification of the prosperity of the realm. His bravery is like that of the heroes of the Maha Bharata, his glory that of the ancient kings of the epic. His face is radiant like the lotus awakened from its sleep by the rays of the sun. In his campaigns, the demigods, the sun, the moon and the planets share. Later, Bilhana, even while claiming to write a historical epic, does not  
 ✓ hesitate to introduce God Siva as an ally of the king, his patron.



The most interesting of these inscriptions is the panegyric of Samudra Gupta, the conquering imperialist of the Gupta dynasty who extended his campaigns even to South India. The date of the inscription is about 350 A.D. and it is engraved on a pillar at Allahabad. This Sanskrit composition which refers to itself as a Kavya is by the poet Hari Shena. It commences with eight stanzas describing vividly the death of Chandra Gupta and the accession of his son Samudra Gupta, then passes over to one long, sonorous prose sentence and winds up with a eulogistic stanza. Chandra Gupta is a great hero, the cause of the elevation of the good and the destruction of the bad and thus a counterpart of the unfathomable Absolute, which is the cause of the origin and destruction of the world, and in which good and bad have their being. The death scene is visualised vividly. " 'He is a noble youth,' said the king and embraced the prince, tremors of joy betraying his emotion. He gazed on him with tear-filled eyes, following his every movement and weighing his worth. The courtiers sighed and gloomy were the faces of the kinsfolk. The king said, 'Do thou protect the earth.' " Samudra Gupta, besides being a warrior, is described here as a king of poets. Vatsa Bhatti, likewise, celebrated in a series of forty-four stanzas, in about 473 A.D. the consecration of the Sun Temple at Dasa Pura (Mandasor). But we do not need the help of indirect evidence any further. We have the poems themselves when we reach this period. As a matter of fact, there is a strong impression that Vatsa Bhatti moulded his poem on the style and idiom of Kalidasa.

## II. Asvaghosha

About the period of Asvaghosha, the author of the two Kavyas, *Saundara Nanda* and *Buddha Charita*, there is difference of opinion among scholars. There are parallelisms between Asvaghosha and Kalidasa. After citing these, Nandargikar<sup>6</sup> comes to the conclusion that Kalidasa was earlier to Asvaghosha. But this conclusion has not found general support. There is nothing definitive to show in these parallelisms that Asvaghosha was not prior to Kalidasa. In fact, the parallelisms are more abundant between Asvaghosha's Kavyas and the Ramayana, as B.C. Law<sup>7</sup> has shown. And it may very well be that the parallelisms be-



tween Asvaghosha and Kalidasa are really convergences due to both writers freely accepting the inspiration of Valmiki. Several scholars agree to ascribe Asvaghosha to the first or second century A.D.

- Textual references reveal that Asvaghosha was a Buddhist monk from Saketa (Ayodhya) and that his mother's name was Suvarnakshi. Beyond that we have very little personal data about him.
- ✓ His respect for Brahminical ideas and traditions suggests that he may have been a Brahmin who later embraced Buddhism. It
  - ✓ may also be significant that the theme of conversion figures prominently in his work. When the Roman empire began to accept the Christian faith, we find many Christian writers eager to win for their doctrine the literary prestige of Roman classics of the pre-Christian period. In fact the aggressive Jerome wrote a history of Christian Latin writing. Likewise, Asvaghosha may have felt the urge to compose Kavyas on Buddhist themes. The perfection of the Ramayana and the fact that Asvaghosha was a native of Ayodhya made it readily acceptable as a model. In several passages, Siddhartha's renunciation of the world is compared to Rama's renunciation of the kingdom of Ayodhya.

- Asvaghosha is forthright about his didactic intention. At the close of the *Buddha Charita*, he says, "The noble law of the Buddha ought to receive the adoration of the world. To sing the praises of the lordly monk, and declare his acts from first to last, without self-seeking or self-honour, without desire for personal renown, but following what the scriptures say, to benefit the world, has been my aim." The work did indeed gain the status in the Buddhist tradition which Ramayana gained in the
- ✓ Hindu faith. The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Yi Tsing, who visited India in the seventh century, wrote: "*The Buddha Charita* is widely read or sung throughout the five divisions of India and the countries of the Southern Sea. Asvaghosha clothes manifold meanings and ideas in a few words, which rejoice the heart of the reader, so that he never feels tired from reading the poem. Besides, it should be counted as meritorious for one to read this book, in as much as it contains the noble doctrine given in a concise form."

But we shall make a serious mistake if we regard Asvaghosha's works as extended sermons. He was a gifted poet. He was sen-



sitive to the beauty of the world. The landscape of the Gangetic plain comes to life in him, the water-birds busy hunting for food in a marsh, or the Brahminy ducks rising and falling on a lake as the west wind of early summer lashes its surface into waves. But Asvaghosha is also poignantly alive to the transience of things, especially of human life. "The lost season returns in the cycle of the year. The waning moon grows full-orbed again. But the youth of man flows by, never to return, like the waters carried away by the rivers." He was filled with the yearning to make life brimful of peace, to smoothen the frictions among men, to exorcise sorrow and above all to face life courageously, without any illusions about any deferred joys in an after-life. "To escape the joys of after-life, this is the world's chief joy." The doctrine of the Buddha was the surest way to peace, in his opinion. The great teacher raised him to an intensity of adoration. "Who that hears of him but yearns of love!" This ground tone of emotional exaltation pervades his works and the exaltation of a poetic temperament could not but yield poems of high excellence.

The *Saundara Nanda*,<sup>8</sup> a Kavya in eighteen cantos, opens in epic manner with an account of the line of kings in which Sid-dhartha was born. The line is linked to the Ikshvaku line of Rama. Some Ikshvaku princes comes to the hermitage of Kapila, banished by their father on the instigation of their step-mother. The building of the city of Kapilavastu is described. After many generations, Shuddhodhana becomes the king. The gods select his queen, Maya, as the mother of the Buddha and the prince is born. A younger queen gives birth to another boy, Nanda, called Sundara because of his handsome looks. The poem deals with the conversion of Nanda.

While the Buddha renounces the world, Nanda lives in the palace, deeply in love with his wife, Sundari. "Had Nanda not won Sundari, or had not the lady with the beautifully arched brows loved him, this pair would assuredly have been incomplete and lost their radiance, even as the night and the noon when severed." One day, the young couple is immersed in amorous dalliance. Sundari asks Nanda to hold a mirror before her. She looks at the beard of her husband and begins to paint her own cheek in imitation of a beard. Nanda teases her by breathing on the mirror and making the reflection misty. While the



couple is engaged thus, the Buddha comes to the house begging for alms, gets no response to his call and goes away. When Nanda comes to know of this, he goes in search of the Buddha. Sundari makes him promise to come back before the paint on her cheek is dry. But the magnetism of the Buddha overwhelms Nanda who joins the order. The lament of Sundari, like the lament, earlier, of Yasodhara, the bride of Siddhartha, is very moving.

But Nanda was not mature and he repents of having joined the order. With the help of a long list of examples from history and legend, he affirms the over-mastering power of love and seeks self-justification in longing for reunion with his beloved. He is first taken to heaven so that he can forget the beauty of a mortal woman with a glimpse of the beauty of the heavenly nymphs. Later, the Buddha's teaching makes him realise that even the beauty of the nymphs is vanity. He practises self-discipline and becomes liberated. The conclusion becomes enlivened by the humanism of the Mahayana doctrine. For the Buddha counsels him not to be satisfied with his own emancipation, but to work for the emancipation of others also. "He is considered the best of men who, after obtaining the best and final stage, desires, unmindful of the personal trouble, to guide others to peace. Leaving aside, therefore, thy own salvation, go on doing, though with steady character, the work for others. Hold up the torch in the darkness of the night to the beings who are wandering, being themselves enveloped by darkness."

The *Buddha Charita*<sup>9</sup> is a Kavya in twenty-eight cantos on the life of the Buddha, which begins with his birth and closes with the first Buddhist Council and the reign of Asoka. The full poem has survived only in Chinese and Tibetan versions. The Sanskrit text that has come down to us has only cantos two to thirteen in their entirety and portions of cantos one and fourteen. At the birth of the prince, the firm earth, though nailed down by the king of mountains, trembled like a ship struck by the wind. From the cloudless sky, there fell a shower perfumed with sandal and bringing blue and pink lotuses. The sage Atisa who comes to see the infant bursts into tears. The father is alarmed. "Is this young shoot of my family, just sprung up, fated to wither without flowering? Tell me quickly, lord, I am all uneasy; for



The years go by peacefully. "For the king, heaven rained in due time and place, with gentle winds and rumbling clouds, and with the sky adorned with rings of lightning, but without the evils of thunderbolts." The boy grows up, absorbing the intimations of beauty from nature. "He listened to songs celebrating the forests, with their soft grass, with their trees resounding with the calls of the cuckoos and with their adornment of lotus ponds." Then comes the dramatic confrontation of decay and death. During a pleasure-ride in the chariot, for the first time he sees an old man. "Good charioteer, who is this man with white hair, supporting himself with a staff, his eyes veiled by the brows, his limbs bent? Is this some transformation in him, or his original state, or mere chance?" The charioteer replies: "It is old age that has broken him, age, the robber of beauty, the destroyer of strength, the cradle of sorrow, the grave of pleasure, the foe of the senses, the ruin of memory. He also sucked as a babe at his mother's breast and learned to walk in the course of time; according to the order of nature he became a handsome youth and in the same natural order he has now reached old age. Inevitably, by force of time, my long-lived lord will also know this phase of his days." Close upon this revelation comes another confrontation. "Who is this, carried along yonder by four men and followed by a dejected company? He is dressed out gorgeously and yet they bewail him." "This is someone or other, lying bereft of intellect, senses and breath, unconscious, become like a mere log or bundle of grass. He was brought up and cherished most lovingly and now he is being abandoned." Startled



by this reply, the young prince queries: "Is this law of being peculiar to this man, or is such the end of all creatures?" The charioteer replies, "This is the last act for all creatures. Destruction is inevitable for all in the world, be he of low or middle or high degree."

This sudden confrontation with the decay at the heart of things immerses the young prince in a brooding melancholy. Efforts are made to win him back to the world with the loveliest gifts that life can offer. He is taken for an outing in the woods in the company of damsels who exercise their spells on him. "One damsel repeatedly let her blue garments slip down under the pretext of intoxication, and, with her girdle partly seen, she seemed like the night with the lightning flashing. Others grasped mango-boughs in full flower and leaned so as to display bosoms like golden jars." Their talk is full of veiled suggestions. "Behold this Tilaka tree, embraced by a mango branch, like a man in white garments embraced by a woman with golden yellow body-paint. Listen to the impassioned cuckoo's cry; another bird calls at once like an echo." But their blandishments are of no avail and they murmur in protest. "Can it be that spring brings passion to the birds, but not to the wiseacre who reflects on what he should not reflect on?" Splendid descriptions of the apartment of the ladies follow, recalling the scene which Hanuman saw in Ravana's palace at Lanka. "One maiden lay resplendent, holding a flute in her hand, while her white robe shifted from her bosom, resembling a river whose banks laugh with the foam of its waves and in whose lotuses long rows of bees delight."

But the prince prefers communion with himself, solitary walks where he is alone with his thoughts. One such walk takes him far away from the crowded city. "Desire for the forest as well as the excellence of the land led him on to the more distant jungle-land and he saw the soil being ploughed, with its surface broken with the tracks of the furrows like waves of water. When he saw the ground in this state, with the young grass torn up and scattered by the ploughs and littered with dead worms, insects and other lowly organisms, he mourned deeply as at the slaughter of his own kindred. And as he observed the ploughmen with their bodies discoloured by wind, dust and the sun's rays, and the oxen in distress with the labour of drawing, the noble one



felt extreme compassion."

Thus takes shape the great resolve to leave the palace and the kingdom and not return till an answer to the riddle of existence had been found. The old charioteer who takes him to the outskirts of the city in the quiet of night is unwilling to leave him. The prince tries to make him see the inevitability of parting. "As birds collect on the roosting tree and then go their separate ways again, so inevitably the union of beings ends in their parting. As the clouds come together and depart asunder again, so I deem the meeting and severance of creatures that draw breath. And since this world is in a state of continuous separating, therefore the feeling that 'this is mine' is improper with regard to a coming together that is transitory as a dream." The chariot returns alone to the palace. "The horse Kanthaka, penetrating into the royal dwelling and looking round him with tear-streaming eyes, cried out with a loud voice as if proclaiming his suffering to the people." When she hears the terrible news, Yasodhara, the bride of Siddhartha, is more anxious on his account than on hers. "How can he sleep tonight, my faithful one, on one poor mat covering the bare earth, he who has slept so far on a couch of gold undefiled and whom music has aroused from his slumbers?" suga

In true epic style, the temptation by Mara becomes in this poem a great battle. "When the evil one had retired worsted, the sky became calm, the moon shone forth, flowers rained from heaven, night shone clear like a maiden pure." The moment of the great enlightenment is described in exalted terms. "Thus did he complete the end of self, as fire goes out for want of grass. Thus he had done what he would have men do: he first had found the way of perfect knowledge. The darkness disappeared, light burst upon him. Perfectly silent and at rest, he reached the last exhaustless source of truth." The insight he now gained rejected all unnecessary asceticism and mortification of the flesh. "In as much as it is under the direction of the mind that the body acts and ceases to act, therefore it is the taming of the mind only that is required." appreciation He rejected the ascription of cleansing power to places of pilgrimages and waters held sacred. "For if whatever water has been touched by the virtuous is claimed as a sacred pool on earth, I regard only the virtues as the sacred pool, for beyond all doubt water is just water." If, in the initial disillusion-



sionment, existence was felt to be an endless series of partings, in the final vision compassion is realised as the highest fulfilment and the Buddha forgets the self in the service of others.

A lofty vision of life, rather than a specific religious creed, is the inspiration of Asvaghosha, as it was of Valmiki to whom he was greatly indebted in matters of technique. His narration is limpid, usually free from digressions and the proportion of space allotted to each episode has been calculated with care. This clear articulation will not be very much evident in the later Kavyas, some of which will also miss the profound human quality of Asvaghosha.

As there is only one another Kavya dealing with the life of the Buddha we may mention it here, though it is later than Kalidasa. It is the *Padya Chudamani* in ten cantos ascribed to one Buddha Ghosha, who is certainly not the famous commentator of that name. Probably he might have been an anonymous writer who was familiar with the epic of Asvaghosha and Kalidasa and made liberal use of them. The poetic quality is not of a particularly high order. An idea of his style may be obtained from passages like this: "The dawn, seeing the world's conqueror (the Buddha) in orange robes, began to clothe herself in the same colour, as if at his bidding. The sun, himself having originated the kingly line of which he was a descendant, ascended the eastern hill top in order to have his fill of gaze at his progeny, the jewel of the Sakya clan. The sun clove the darkness with his rays, showing thereby to him how to liberate mankind enshrouded in ignorance. The tanks full of lotus buds seemed as if doing obeisance with folded palms to him who had realised life's purpose."

### III. Kalidasa

We have very little personal data about Kalidasa, for the legends that have grown around him are too crude and unreliable to deserve any notice. Even his date is the subject of a still unsettled controversy though it has been discussed at length by Gawronski,<sup>10</sup> Hillebrandt,<sup>11</sup> Pathak,<sup>12</sup> Keith,<sup>13</sup> Winternitz<sup>14</sup> and Thomas.<sup>15</sup> Certain upper and lower limits can be set. It is clear that he lived after King Agnimitra Sunga (about 150 B.C.) and before 634 A.D., the date of the famous Aihole inscription which



refers to Kalidasa as a great poet. If the suggestion that Vatsa Bhatti's verses in the Mandasor inscription of 473 assume knowledge of Kalidasa's writings is accepted, then his date cannot be later than the end of the fourth century. Most scholars are of the opinion that Kalidasa belonged to the Gupta period and lived during the reign of Chandra Gupta II (345-414) who had the title Vikramaditya, the Sun of Valour. This is the most reasonable conjecture possible with the data now available. \*

But we know him as the author of the narrative poems, *Ritu Samhara* (Seasons), *Megha Duta* (Cloud Messenger), the epic poems, *Raghu Vamsa* (Dynasty of Raghu) and *Kumara Sambhava* (Birth of the War-God) and the plays, *Vikramorvasi*, *Malavikagnimitra* and *Shakuntala*. And he is fully revealed in his works. He seems to have travelled widely, for he is intimately acquainted with the variegated landscape of India, the deodars of the Himalayas, the sandal of Kashmir, the sandy beaches of the Indus, the pearl-fisheries of the Tamravarni, the betel and coconut palms of Kalinga. He accepted the cosmic process as an order, moving towards a fulfilment, and he accepted all the loveliest gifts that the earth could offer, his keen enjoyment always tempered by the finest taste. This optimism and taste find reflection in his style and diction, flawless, limpid, musical, untouched by that love of pedantry which vitiates much of later poetry. ✓

*The Ritu Samhara*<sup>16</sup> (Seasons) is the work of early youth, but of the youth of a very sensitive poet whose eye misses no loveliness in nature, whose heart resonates to the romantic intimations of the objective detail and whose style can mirror the loveliness seen by the eye and felt by the heart. This short narrative poem of six cantos, about one hundred and fifty stanzas in all, begins with the summer and covers the Indian year with its cycle of six seasons. The Parnassian, Leconte de Lisle, has not evoked the implacable midsummer noon with any greater objective truth. The tropical summer is here with its sweltering heat, the sunbeams burning like fires of sacrifice and the earth swept with whirling clouds of dust driven by intolerable gusts. There lies the lion forgetting his mighty leap; his tongue lolls and wearily from time to time he shakes his mane. The wild boars are digging in the dried mud of the ponds with their long snouts, as if they would



burrow their way into the earth in search of coolness somewhere deep below. The deer roam about in search of water. The birds feel faint on the leafless trees. The parched forests are brown and sere and soon they are in the grip of fire. "Beginning in the woodland edges, the forest fire increases with the wind and attacks the glens of the mountains. It crackles with shrill shoutings in the dry bamboo thickets. It spreads to the grasses, grows into a huge conflagration in a moment and harasses the beasts of the wilderness."

But the Indian summer has also its rich compensations. If the sun scalds, summer is also the season of beautiful evenings and glorious moonlight. Girls with their smiling faces and loveliest eyes are like "evenings beautifully jewelled with the moon." Miserable is the plight of travellers who, "with their hearts burnt by the fire of separation from their beloveds, cannot bear the sight of the earth parched by the fierce sun and having columns of dust raised by unbearable winds." But the luckier young people delight in song and dance and wine long past midnight and the moon retires towards the dawn, growing pale with shame at the lovelier brightness of woman's face. Kalidasa can seize the elusive beauty of the passing away of the summer night: "Night on the verge of dawn with her faint-gleaming moon and a few just decipherable stars...."

The rainy season comes now like a mighty king to drive away the oppressive summer. The clouds are the elephants which bear him in royal procession, the lightning is his streaming banner and the thunder, the peal of the royal drums. On the horizon, great clouds, bluer than the blue lotus, climb hugely into the sky and move across it in a slow procession before a sluggish breeze. Innumerable streams appear on the hill slopes. "The new water, muddy, full of insects, dust and grass, running in a zig-zag course like a serpent, and eyed by distracted frogs, rushes down to a low level." The racing stream dashes its ripples in the wild-duck's face, the wind comes trembling through the burdened rice-stalk, making one flowery ripple of the lotus-crowded lake. The hill-slope is a gorgeous chaos of peacocks, exulting in the rain. The bees seek the outspread tails of the dancing peacocks deeming that flowers have blossomed there. This is a poetic conceit, for bees have better sense than to go chasing peacocks' tails. But



Kalidasa's conceits always have at their core a startlingly fresh sensuous perception. Here the riot of colour of the peacocks' plumage is brought out brilliantly and we are willing to suspend disbelief. The conceits of later poetry lack this inspired touch and the deviation from the truth of nature becomes strained and tiresome. The rainy season is also full of romantic intimations. Like flirtatious maidens, the torrents caress the plants on their banks and run away, the clouds stoop to kiss the mountain peaks. With the rainbow, strung by the lightning, and with showers of rain as arrows, the season assails the hearts of those who are separated from their beloveds.

Now comes the autumn. The cloudless blue sky with its moon and stars shines like a lovely pond filled with clear, emerald water and radiant with white lilies and swans. The season is like a young bride, clad in the green garment of sugar cane fields, girdled with the gold of ripening paddy and with face of lotus blooms. A lovelier maiden arrives with day-fall. The autumn night, like a young girl, shines with her moon-face free from the veil of cloud and decked with radiant jewel-like stars and dressed in the white silk of moonlight. Creepers embrace trees with their fair tendril arms. But in winter the bloom of tender flowers is past and lilies droop forlorn. The fate of the Priyangu creeper, buffeted by the breeze, is that of the maiden severed from her lover. But, for her whose lover is beside her, this is the season of seasons. For winter's cold makes all the more welcome, all the more close and tender, the embraces of lovers. In the season of dew that follows, the stars are pale, the moonbeams cold, lovers close the windows of their chamber and relax beside the fire. Kalidasa began with summer because he could close with spring, the season in which young love is made perfect. Young frames have a new glow of loveliness and hearts a new glow of love. The wind-shaken mango tree with light-red tender leaves and inflorescences which look like the arrows of the God of Love fires the hearts of the young.

Though a work of early youth, *Ritu Samhara* clearly reveals Kalidasa's poetic temperament. He seizes the sensuous detail in nature with Parnassian objective truth, but he does not like the Parnassian aloofness of heart and yields fully to the romantic suggestions of nature. The landscape painting is never without



human figures. We get many sensuous vignettes. "As she rushed to the window, her garlands fell from their place and she did not even pause to trouble to knot the abundant hair but merely gathered it in her hand." Here is an even more intimate cameo. "When, in the course of dalliance, the flowers drop from the ears of the damsels, they do not fall to the ground but stick to their cheeks pearly with the sweat of amorous sport and add to their confusion."

In the *Megha Duta*<sup>17</sup> (Cloud Messenger) also we find this blending of romantic theme and landscape painting. But this time the narrative is worked into a story. A Yaksha or angel, attendant of Kubera, god of wealth, is banished for neglect of duty by Siva for a year. He is to spend his exile on Rama Giri, in the Vindhyan ranges. Here, out of the heart's desire to relieve his wife of her anxiety, he appeals to a passing cloud to bear to her the assurance of his constant thought. This affords him—and the poet—the opportunity of describing the course the cloud must take to reach its destination in the Himalayas. The romantic travelogue unfolds in about hundred stanzas of the stately metre, Mandakranta.

Rama Giri in the Vindhyas was watered by rills which were once hallowed by Sita's bathing. The inspiration of Valmiki is very evident in this poem. The exiled Yaksha yearns for his beloved like Rama once yearned for Sita. Hanuman's mission to Lanka is the original prototype of the Sandesa Kāvya (Message-Poem) which Kalidasa stabilised as a separate literary species and which found numerous imitators in later times. There are even closer parallelisms, especially in the description of the rainy season in Ramayana and *Megha Duta*.

After narrating his tale of woe the Yaksha requests the cloud to proceed on his errand, for there are favourable prognostics. A gentle breeze has risen to fan the cloud's northward way. The plover on the left sings with cheer. The cranes with silver pinions wreath a row in the sky celebrating their festival of gestation. "When they hear thy melodious rumbling capable of making the earth full of sprouting mushrooms, the flamingoes winging their way to the distant Manasa lake with bits of lotus shoots in their beaks, shall become thy companions up to Mount Kailasa." Vignettes follow, of the Malwa plateau fragrant with the fresh



furrowing of the plough and with joyous peasant girls greeting the rain on which the harvest depends, of the river Narmada scattered into many a stream on the rockstrewn foot of the Vindhya. "There the stags, spying along the marshy banks where the mad-dar has turned brown due to the half-blown filaments, pasturing on the plantains whose first buds have begun to appear and scenting the sweet smell of the forest earth, will indicate your path as you sprinkle gentle drops of rain."

Though a great lover of nature, Kalidasa was an urbanite and the village and city emerge in unforgettable evocations. "At their approach, the land of Dasarna will be rich with its garden hedgerows gilded white by the Ketaki blooms blown at their apex, its village trees busy with the nest-building birds, the skirts of its Jambu orchards laden with ripe fruits." The city of Ujjaini is the equal of the cloud in glory. "Its palaces can vie with you in every respect. Their fair maidens rival thy lightning, their paintings thy rainbow, the drums of their musical concerts thy lovely deep rumblings, their jewelled floors thy water, the peaks of their mansions that touch the sky thy height." The home of the Yaksha also resembles the cloud. For there is a pleasure-hill there and its sapphire-crest girdled by a golden plantain grove recalls the blue base of the cloud begirt by the golden lightning. The home will be seen thus by the approaching cloud. "There to the north of Kubera's palace stands our home that can be discerned from afar, distinguished by an arching gateway lovely like a rainbow, and near it is a young Mandara tree bending beneath bunches of blooms within reach of the hand, reared like an adopted child by my beloved."

The changing landscape is full of romantic suggestions which, incidentally, come naturally to the Yaksha separated from his beloved. The Sindhu stream, grown pale with yellow leaves that have fallen from trees on the banks, is like a girl emaciated by separation from her lover. The thin stream is her single, attenuated tress. The soft dark cloud glows like pomaded tresses. With her tinkling girdle in the form of a row of loquacious water-birds, the Nirvindhya stream is a maid who glides faltering sweetly, occasionally displaying her navel-eddy. When the blue cloud comes to rest on a mango orchard covered with golden fruit atop a hill, the scene would look, from high above, like earth's golden



breast with its dark nipple. In the cities, the breeze blows from the river, scented with lotus pollen and aromatic with the bath perfumery of youthful beauties sporting in the stream. In Ujjaini, the breeze at dawn, blowing from Kshipra's stream, prolongs the clear and passionately sweet warbling of the water-fowl and, laden with the aroma of the lotuses just blown, it removes the damsels' languor of dalliance like a lover who whispers solicitations for renewal of love's delight. "Show the path, O cloud, to the damsels there stealing to their lovers' abodes along paths shrouded in darkness thick enough to be pierced by a needle, with the help of thy lightning, flashing like a golden gleam from a touchstone." In the morning, however, there is tell-tale evidence of the stealthy sojourns. "The paths of night pursued by the amorous damsels are betrayed at sunrise by the Mandara blossoms that had slipped from their tresses owing to their swaying gait, by the pearls from their necklaces which had snapped, tossed by their swelling, swaying breasts." The final stanzas give a profile of the Yaksha's beloved. "You will see her engaged in her daily worship, or trying to draw my likeness, emaciated by separation, or asking her pet parrot, 'Do you remember, dear, our lord? Indeed you were his pet.' Or perhaps, placing her lute on her lap, her shabby linen revealing her distraught condition, she will try to sing a song wherein she has worked my name, but, scarce able to vibrate the string, which her tears have bedewed, she will forget the melody, though she herself had composed it." This is the Yaksha's message: "I behold thy frame in the Shyama creepers, thy glances in the eyes of the startled fawn, the likeness of thy face in the moon, thy tresses in the rich plumes of the peacocks and the graceful movements of thy brows in the tiny ripples of the rivers. But alas! in no single place is seen thine whole likeness."

If in diction and style and general texture, the *Ritu Samhara* and the *Megha Duta* align themselves with epic poetry, they lack the dimensional magnitude of the epic poem. But they were an excellent preparation for the two epic poems that followed. Of these, the *Raghu Vamsa*<sup>18</sup> (Dynasty of Raghu) is a narrative in nineteen cantos of the Solar Race of kings. The theme is intractable for achieving real unity and out of the twenty-nine kings who figure in the epic, Kalidasa has had to dismiss twenty



with a brief mention only.

Dilipa is the first, pious but childless. The sage Vasishta tells him the cause of his misfortune. Eager to return to his beloved wife from a visit to Indra, he has failed to pay the due homage to Indra's divine cow, Surabhi, incidentally a symbol of agricultural prosperity, and she has cursed him to be without an offspring until he wins the favour of her daughter, Nandini. He humbly serves the cow, offers his own life when a lion attacks her. But the lion is an attendant of Siva sent to test his loyalty. At last he gets a son, Raghu.

Raghu is a great world-conqueror and fights even Indra. The god, of course, cannot be worsted, but is pleased by his bravery. A brilliant picture is unfolded of his progress. The sea of his hosts covers the long slope of the Sahya mountains, the dust of the army clings to the hair of the ladies of Kerala. He advances against the Persians and the Greeks. The clouds of dust raised by the conflict hide the warring hosts and their presence is revealed by the twang of their bows alone.

Raghu's son Aja wins the beautiful princess Indumati at the Swayamvara ceremony where princesses were permitted to select for themselves the suitor who most pleased their mind. Aja is attacked by the other suitors and defeats them in a spirited engagement. The return of the young couple to the capital is the occasion of great jubilation. Women in the midst of their toilet run to the windows when the procession approaches. But Indumati is really a nymph of heaven who had been sent to earth for neglect of duty till she should see a divine garland. A heavenly garland falls on her breast one day, after many years of happiness, and strikes her dead. This scene is one of the highlights of the poem. "Seated on her husband's lap and with colour suddenly changed, she drew him down as she fell herself, even as does an oil-drop reach the ground bearing along the spark of the lighted wick." Aja's lament is one of the most moving passages in Sanskrit poetry. "The mistress of my home, the comrade, the companion of my secret hours, the dear pupil who studied every art with me; in taking thee, say, what of mine hath not pitiless death reft from me?" He muses on the tragic irony of flowers becoming the weapons of death. "Or perhaps death felt it meet to assail the tender with the soft, as flowers are torn by dew-fall." He



cannot believe that she is dead. "The wind stirs the tresses, dark like a cluster of bees and braided with flowers, and creates the illusion that life is being restored to the frame . . . . You who were never offended with me even on the occasion of my extreme petulance, how can you have the heart to utter no word to me now?" He cannot bear to think of the obsequies which have to follow. "How can your soft body, for which the softest bed was not soft enough, bear to lie on the funeral pyre? . . . . O fair-eyed one, how can you, who have drunk the nectar of my lips, taste now the offering of water, defiled by my tears, which will reach you in the other world?" The sage Vasishta consoles him. "The union of body and soul and their severance are ordained . . . . First of the mighty, thou shouldst not, like a common man, fall a prey to the power of sorrow. What difference is there between the tree and the rock, if in the wind both tremble alike? . . . . Be the earth here thy care, for she is the king's true bride."

✓ Aja's son is Dasaratha who will be followed by Rama. This ✓ means that the entire story of the Ramayana is to be abridged in this section. Kalidasa manages this brilliantly. In one canto he condenses the whole story upto the defeat of Ravana. The earlier sequences of the life in the forest, the happy years when Sita was with Rama and the desolation after she was abducted, are brought forward to the next canto as a retrospect. Flying back to Ayodhya in Ravana's air-borne car, Rama points out to Sita the various scenes of their past joys and sorrows. This enables Kalidasa to give descriptions of nature where objective truth blends with the heart's sentiment. The landscape emerges in full visual beauty, but often it is seen through moist eyes. The car flies at many heights, the abysses of space, the cloud-haunted levels, the lower heights where the birds wing their way. The cool breeze quickly dries the pearling sweat caused by the noon-day heat. As Sita puts out her hand through the window, the clouds scintillate into lightnings as if to decorate it with a golden bangle. Flying over the sea to the mainland, the tumultuous ocean is seen below. Geysers rise like fountains from the blowing whales. Molluscs with beautiful shells kiss corals red as Sita's lips but are separated reluctantly by the pull of the receding tide. Forests of arecanut palms, crowned with bunches of small golden nuts, embroider the shore. As the car proceeds further



inland, it looks as if the earth with its forests is rising slowly from the sea. The plantains at the foot of the Malayavan hill had blossomed early with the heat of the steam rising from the newly drenched earth, when Rama had come across them first and they had reminded him of the fragrant incense rising from the sacred fire in their marriage altar, decorated with plantains. But with the monsoon cloud he too had rained tears, when he had recollected Sita's frightened embraces whenever thunder exploded reverberatingly in the hills. He had watched with breaking heart the mating water-birds who lovingly pecked the stamens of lotuses and offered them to each other. At Panchavati the mango saplings which Sita had planted and tended have grown into stalwart trees. The river Ganga, with its clear water, now looms into sight looking like a thin stream due to the distance. There is a superb description of the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna where blue waters mingle with the foaming white and weave a garland of pearls and blue stones. The stretch of water here glows like an expanse of moonlight shadowed here and there.

The rest of the kings are shadowy figures. The theme is not plastic enough for achieving any real unity of design and what sustains it is the musical flow of the narrative, studded with exquisite imagery, resonant with emotional overtones. But Kalidasa manages to incorporate in the narrative his life-view. He accepts the catholic pattern laid down by the ethical treatises. Duty is man's greatest ideal and it governs the whole of his life. The pursuit of wealth and of love is legitimate occupation of his manhood, but liberation should be the aim of his meditations in old age. Several of the kings accept this scheme. Kalidasa demands a high sense of responsibility from rulers. It is significant that the narrative comes to an end with Agnivarna, a dissolute ruler who never left his harem to attend to the business of state. Rama's successor Kusa sees a dream in which the kingdom of Ayodhya comes to him in the guise of a suffering woman. "Like a sombre day-fall where the magnificent clouds which had piled up earlier have been scattered by a wind, the glory of the great mansions and mighty fortresses has vanished due to neglect. Jackals venture on the streets once crowded with lovely women. On the flights of steps which had once been stained red by the rouge from damsels' feet, today there is the dark stain of the



blood of deer killed by marauding tigers. The aroma of toiletry no longer clings to the waters of lakes, no offerings of flower and leaf drift 'on the river's slow current." The dream rouses Kusa to energetic action for the country's welfare.

- The *Kumara Sambhava*<sup>19</sup> (Birth of the War-God) has perfect unity of design. The demon Taraka oppresses men and gods and it is revealed that only a progeny of the great God Siva will be able to vanquish him. The poem opens with a description of the Himalayas where Siva, the great Yogi, sits rapt in meditation.
- ✓ The sage Narada has prophesied that Parvati, the daughter of the mountain god, will marry him. She spends her days in his worship, but the great ascetic is not conscious of her presence. Therefore Indra sends Madana, God of Love, accompanied by Vasanta, God of the Spring season. Madana was about to shoot his flower-arrow when Siva, who already felt disturbed by the unconscious stirring of the season in his blood, opens his eyes and his glance
  - ✓ burns Madana to ashes. The moving lamentations of his wife Rati follow. She prefers to follow him in death when a voice assures her of her reunion with him when Siva and Parvati are united. Siva returns to his meditation. Parvati undertakes the most terrible austerities and pleased with her devotion Siva woos her. The epic is in seventeen cantos and the wedding brings us to the eighth canto. Most scholars feel that cantos nine to seven-
  - ✓ teen are not by Kalidasa. Why he did not complete the poem himself remains a mystery. The explanation that he was cut off by death is not tenable, for there are many indications that the *Raghu Vamsa* was composed after this poem. Probably the epic really ends with the union of Parvati and Siva, presaging as
  - ✓ it does the advent of a son. The author of the interpolated cantos, however, has gone on to describe the birth and growth of Kumara and the battle between him and the demon Taraka.

The bleak heights of the Himalayas are transformed by radiant fancy. The mountains are the homes of nymphs and woodland deities who sport in their caves, round which eddy the clouds, serving as welcome screen to the newly married Kinnara maidens overcome with bashfulness when their impatient lovers disrobe them. The wind, wet with the drops of the stream of the Ganges as it descends from heaven, shakes the deodar trees, ruffles the peacock feathers, the dress of the tribesmen and cools their limbs



in their hot chase of the antelope. In the midst of this surging life sits Siva, sunk in the deepest meditation. "Like a rain cloud with no violence of rain he sat, like a lake of deep water on which no wave arose, like a lamp flame shielded from the wind and unflickering."

Parvati with her attendant maidens waits on this ascetic, who is oblivious of their presence. Her figure emerges in a most sensuous evocation. When she walked, her feet with their pink toes seemed like mobile clusters of land-lotuses. "The thin line of young hair which, having passed the knot of her skirt, entered the hollow of her navel, shone like the rays of the central blue gem on her waist-band." The breasts swelled high so that between them there was not the space even for the silken fibre from a lotus stalk. The fluttering eyes recalled the petals of the blue lotus in a strong breeze. "Was this exquisite, timid glance borrowed by her from the deer or by the deer from her?" She was wearing ornaments of spring flowers, whose Asoka blossoms put the ruby to shame, whose Karnikara flowers had stolen the lustre of gold, whose Sinduvara flowers had become a necklace of pearls. Leaning a little forward because of her exuberant breasts, and wearing a garment red as the morning sun, as she walked she seemed like a budding creeper walking, bowed with its clusters of mature blossoms. "Her girdle of Bakula flowers she ever and again supported as it slipped over her hips—the girdle which was, it seemed, the second string to the Love-God's bow, and had been deposited there as a pledge by him, since he knew of no other ideal place."

But all this beauty is of no avail in stirring the heart of the great Yogi and Indra summons Madana, the God of Love. There is humour in Madana's misunderstanding as to why he has been sent for. Indra is as easily excited by women's beauty as Zeus and popular mythology is full of stories of his escapades. So Madana deferentially enquires: "Which damsel of swelling hips, who has been keeping the inconvenient vow of being faithful to one husband and who has invaded your thoughts, do you desire, that she should throw her hands voluntarily round your neck, casting aside all bashfulness?" Indra assures him that this time he is giving precedence to historic purposes over his own pressing requirements. Madana promises to thaw the heart of Siva if



Vasanta, the God of Spring, helps him as his lieutenant.

The woods break into the glory of spring. "Curved like the young moon, since they were not fully opened, the deep-red Palasa flowers glowed like the weals of nail marks left on the sylvan sites by the close embrace of ardent spring . . . . Their vision obstructed by the pollen dust of the clusters of the Priyala tree, the love-smitten deer roamed, breasting the wind, through the glades rustling with fallen leaves . . . . The sweet cooing of the male cuckoo, his neck red-yellow through tasting the young mango shoots, became the irresistible voice of Love himself . . . . With his antlers, the black antelope gently scratched the doe, who closed her eyes at his touch . . . . From their beloveds, the creepers, whose breasts were clusters of full-blown flowers, lovely with the trembling of the fresh shoots which were their lips, even the trees received embraces for which their bough-arms bent down."

The jubilant awakening of the creative life-impulse all over the earth affects Siva also. His heart is stirred, like the ocean by moonrise. He opens his eyes, his glance dwells on Parvati, he understands the whole situation and the flaming anger of his look reduces Madana to ashes. The moving lament of Rati follows. "Whither have you fled, brushing aside one whose very existence is dependant on you, abruptly breaking the bonds of affection, like a flood which sweeps away the dam and leaves the uprooted lotus plant to its fate? Or could it be that you took offence recalling my having chained you with my girdle for teasing me or my having struck you carelessly with lotuses, hurting your eyes with flower dust?" Even the lifeless body has not been left to lay a wreath upon. "His ashes, coloured like the pigeon's neck are being tossed about by the winds." To Vasanta, who seeks in vain to console her, she says, "Once departed, thy friend will return no more, like the flame which, extinguished by a gust of wind, comes not back. I am like the wick of the flame, sorrow unending circles me like smoke. Decorating my breasts with these very ashes of my lord's body, I will consign my body to the care of the burning pyre as eagerly as on a bed of tender leaves." But she is stayed by a celestial voice which assures her that her lord will be reborn when Siva and Parvati are united.

But that happy ending seems to be far off now. The demon Taraka seems to have been given another lease of life. Inciden-



tally, the urbane Kalidasa cannot conceive of real evil and malignity, just as the gentle Fra Angelico could never paint convincing devils. The latter merely look ugly and apologetic. As for Taraka, he seems to have been a great grandee who took his pleasures seriously and, in organising them, did not bother about the inconveniences to others. "The peaks of the Meru mountain, the leaping board of the sun's horses, were uprooted by him and fixed as pleasure-hills in his own grounds." The seasons were asked to forget their job of cyclical rotation throughout the length and breadth of the earth and to wait upon him in common with his gardeners to provide the flowers he wanted at any time. However, he had to be disposed of. Here there is an undercurrent of serious thought below the sensuous tissue of the narrative. Kalidasa does not want to strain an allegory, but Parvati's efforts to reach Siva unobtrusively symbolise the soul's efforts to attain to God. "The beauty of the body had proved to be of no avail." So she turns to an ascetic self-discipline as profound as that of Siva. "She, whose tender body was hurt even by the flowers which slipped from her own tresses whenever she changed position on her soft bed, now slept on the bare ground, using her delicate arm alone as a pillow . . . . Standing as witnesses, as it were, of the severe austerities of that damsel, sleeping on bare rocks, scorning all shelter, the nights saw her with their eyes of lightning when cold winds raged and the rain fell incessantly." There is a magnificent profile of Parvati sitting erect in the Yogic pose of deep meditation, oblivious of all the inclemencies of the weather. "The first drops of rain, resting for a while on her eyelashes, dashed against her lips, and were crushed by their fall on the elevated breasts. Trickling further down on the three skin folds above the waist they sought their way into her deep navel."

Siva is won over now. A relaxed episode follows in which he comes in the guise of a young ascetic to Parvati and tries to make out that Siva is not a worthy husband for her. The Hindu tradition has visualised this god in an extraordinary manner, not paralleled by theistic mythology anywhere in the world. While the other gods are garbed in lovely apparel and resplendent jewellery, Siva, with a fine contempt for such things, dresses himself in an elephant-skin and deadly serpents are his bangles and necklaces. The other gods dwell in palatial abodes. Siva makes the cremation ✓



ground his abode. The disguised ascetic asks Parvati how her delicate hand can bear to hold his hand encircled with serpents in the wedding ceremony, how her bridal garment is going to match with his elephant-skin and what sort of honeymoon spot would be the cremation ground. But Parvati is unshaken and the young ascetic reveals his true identity.

The description of the marriage that follows is full of tender human touches. When the proposal comes, Parvati's father glances to read the decision in his wife's face, "for as a rule householders follow the lead of their wives in the affairs of their daughters." In the mother, joy in the marriage mingles with sorrow at losing her daughter. She cannot paint aright the mark on her child's forehead, or bind correctly her girdle, and the nurse, more restrained in her emotion, must remedy the mistakes. The happiness of the young girl comes out in this little touch. "When, with her long eyes fixed on her mirror, she saw the reflection of her radiant loveliness, swift she hastened to seek Siva, for the fruit of a woman's raiment is the light in the lover's eyes." There is an intimate glance at the timid shyness of the young bride and her lover's ruses. "Addressed, she could not answer. When he touched her gown, she sought to leave him. With head averted she clung to her couch. Yet none the less did she delight her lord."

Kalidasa's urbane and sensitive poetic intelligence accepted the cosmos as an orderly scheme. With the Upanishads he accepted a transcendent reality which was the ground of the universe. A prayer in *Kumara Sambhava* reads: "You, who are the origin of the world, are yourself originless, the destroyer of the world without destruction, the beginner of this world without any beginning, and you are the lord of this world without any master." As a poet he moves nearer to a personalised conception as distinguished from a withdrawn absolute. The transcendent God is also the immanent God. "You are concrete and subtle, perceptible and imperceptible." A prayer to Vishnu in the *Raghu Vamsa* places the accent on immanence and personalism, in the balance. "Far, far removed, yet ever near, untouched by passion, yet pitiful of heart, ancient, yet free from age art thou." He tells us that in matters of doubt about one's duty, the authority is the voice of conscience, the wisdom of the heart. Perhaps he heard in conscience the voice of the human soul which was also the voice of



the world-soul. For, in the altruism to which conscience leads, he saw the most authentic of the many proofs of God. The invocatory verse in *Shakuntala*, for instance, indirectly asks the atheist why he should be troubled about proofs of the existence of God, when there are eight direct pieces of evidence for His existence: the earth, which supports all life; the air, which pervades all space; the fire which purifies and carries the offerings to the ambient space; the water which is the first of created things; the sun and the moon which regulate times; the sky (space or ether) on which everything is rooted, but whose base itself is not visible; and the men with sacrificial spirit who work for others' good.

#### IV. Later Epics

An integrated world-view, a sense of kinship with man and nature, a profound poetic sensibility and above all, an infallible taste, enabled Kalidasa's poetry to win a place in the world heritage. Subsequent epic poetry shows a marked decline in the level of achievement. Fascinated by the descriptive passages in Kalidasa, and in Valmiki earlier, rhetoricians made them an obligatory feature of the epic poem, but both rhetoricians and poets forgot that they were organic elements in Kalidasa and Valmiki, functionally required and used in unfolding the narrative. The story or theme thus becomes unimportant, merely a peg to hang the heavy tissues of the descriptive passages. With the theme no longer seeking to depict man interacting with his environment and creating his destiny, no integrative world-vision emerges. Scholarship does stud the tissue with impressive gnomic utterances and moral maxims, but they do not emerge directly from episodic evolution. The decline of poetic judgment mirrored in all this extends to the descriptions themselves, for often they fail to satisfy us as really kindled by poetic vision and have to be justified from the point of view of rhetoric. The achievement still remains considerable, in terms of craftsmanship, but its appreciation implies a resigned acceptance of lowered standards.

In point of date, Bharavi seems to stand nearest to Kalidasa. He is mentioned along with Kalidasa in the Aihole inscription of 634 and must have lived much earlier. The problem of his date



has been studied by De,<sup>20</sup> Sastri,<sup>21</sup> Kielhorn<sup>22</sup> and others.<sup>23</sup> The most reasonable assumption we can make is that he lived during the middle of the sixth century. In *Kiratarjuniya*,<sup>24</sup> he elaborates a small and simple episode in the Vana Parva of the Maha Bharata into an epic of eighteen cantos. Exiled to the forests, the Pandavas are contemplating the next step. A spy who had been sent to ascertain how Duryodhana was ruling the kingdom returns with reports of the latter's successful administration. A delay in the declaration of war may therefore further strengthen the enemy. In Draupadi, Bharavi has drawn the picture of a high-spirited Kshatriya queen, smarting under the humiliation to which she has been subjected. She advocates war and Bhima also demands it. Vyasa arrives and advises Arjuna to gain divine weapons by propitiating Indra. The journey to the Himalayas affords opportunity for a fine description of the mountain, the autumnal season and the life of the herdsmen. Arjuna's penances begin, followed by the attempt of nymphs to tempt him. One canto is devoted to a moonlit night and the dalliance of the nymphs. At last Indra appears and advises Arjuna to worship Siva. To test his courage Siva appears as a tribal hunter (Kirata) and there is a duel between the two over a boar at which both had shot arrows. Pleased by the bravery of Arjuna, Siva presents him with the mighty Pasupata weapon.

It is evident that Bharavi relies on descriptions to swell the episode to epic length. On occasions, the display of literary ingenuity becomes unbearable to the sensitive reader who would prefer one poetic thought to a ton of conceits. Bharavi produces stanzas which give the same sounds and sense read forwards and backwards or a line which can be read in four different senses or which contains one specific consonant only. But it will be perverse to deny the fine touches. Sensitive are the descriptions of sunset and moonrise. "Ruddy glowed the sun as he hastened to rest, as though overdeep he had drunk with his rays, in his thirst, the sweetness of the lotus . . . . For love's consecration, lady night raised aloft the moon with its shimmering sea of beams and its spots full in view, like a silver chalice decked with lotuses." The advent of the cool season is described thus: "Then came the cool season, Love's one friend, lovely with its mango blooms here and there, when frost is there and but a few Sinduvara blooms awake



from sleep, the harbinger of the end of winter and the coming of spring." The evocation does not reach anywhere near Shakespeare's daffodils that come before the swallow dares, and take the winds of March with beauty, but let us not rudely reject humbler gifts. There is a sensuous description of damsels sporting in the lake. "Hidden by their long tresses in lovely disarray through plunging in the water, the maidens' faces seemed like lotuses covered with swarms of bees . . . . As her hand, full of water, was laughingly grasped by her lover, it was her kindly girdle which the water had stiffened that saved from falling the garment of the excited damsel, for the knot that held it had slipped."

Pleasantly surprising in this aristocratic narrative are the vignettes of rural life. In the marshes near the corn field, the abundance of lotus with its spreading leaves turns the water's tint to an emerald green, streaked with gold where the corn stalks bend low to meet their own reflections. Overhead, pendulous rows of green parrots carrying golden corn-stalks in their red beaks seem like so many rainbows. Peasant women of dark hue decked with red flowers work in the fields. In the evenings, herds of cows, which had left the village for the grazing grounds even before the first streaks of dawn, return. They are eager to rejoin their calves, but their heavy udders prevent them from too swift a pace. Not unwelcome, though not embedded organically in episodic context, are maxims such as these: "The minds of the great do not lose clarity, however violently tossed; the waters of the sea never become turbid though agitated severely by storms."

The date of Magha also is a controversial issue which has been discussed by Kielhorn,<sup>25</sup> Pathak,<sup>26</sup> Kane,<sup>27</sup> Bhattacharya,<sup>28</sup> and others. The most reasonable assumption seems to be that he lived during the latter part of the seventh century. Tradition claims that he consciously set out to excel Bharavi and, in fact, Magha's *Sisupala Vadha*<sup>29</sup> (Slaying of Sisupala) closely parallels the structure and episodic details of Bharavi's epic, though with a different theme. During their rule of Indrapastha (before they lost in the chess game and had to surrender their country) the Pandavas defeat the powerful Jarasandha, ruler of Magadha and Yudhishtira becomes the first ruler in India. He performs the solemn sacrifice of Rajasuya or imperial consecration. Gifts of honour are to be distributed on this occasion on a strict order



of protocol. Bhishma chooses Krishna as the first to be thus honoured. This provokes Sisupala, king of Chedi. He had no cause to like Krishna because Rukmini, the bride meant for him, had eloped with Krishna. Krishna had promised Sisupala's mother to endure a hundred deeds of evil from him before striking back. When Sisupala heaps insults on him, Krishna feels that he has fulfilled his pledge and a battle becomes inevitable. The narrative unfolds to this point with the end of the second canto. The battle is taken up only in the last three cantos. In between comes the long stretch of cantos three to twelve which Magha devotes to the description of Dwaraka, Krishna's capital, Mount Raivataka, Krishna's camp, the six seasons (which take up three cantos) the inevitable carousals of the soldiery and their sweethearts. Krishna's army begins to move only in the twelfth canto.

The sense of artistic propriety is surrendered when a slender episode is forced to sustain such an expanse of digressive description. The search for conceits to fill up the length plays further havoc with propriety. Magha is occasionally capable of astonishing crudity. "The red Asoka flower, surrounded by innumerable golden Champaka blossoms, looked like the flesh of lovers' hearts, dissected by separation and fried by the tongues of flame of the fire of love." He does not see that the evocation brings to mind a butcher's shop.

Nevertheless, poetic touches abound in the poem. The description of Dwaraka, Krishna's capital by the sea, has power. The city is a bride given away by father ocean and the pearls and shells on its shore form the necklace presented by him. Its golden ramparts rise high and their splendour tints the four quarters. To surpass the ramparts in height, the billows of the sea rise high at a great distance, but admitting failure when they get near, they melt away as if overcome by humiliation. Mount Raivataka towers so high that the sun and the moon on either side seem like metal gongs hanging down the sides of an elephant.

Sensitive is the evocation of the spring breeze which creases the lake surface into gentle ripples that shall coax the buds of the blue lotus to unfold their petals, swings the locks of hair of beautiful girls and dabs the sweat pearly on their foreheads. The lightning, flashing from the wind-tossed clouds in the dark sky, looks like blossom-clusters of the Tamala tree, disappearing and reap-



pearing among its wind-shaken foliage. The first few showers of rain make the mountain tracks fit for ladies' promenade by mollifying the heat, settling the dust and emitting a delightfully sweet exhalation. The bees, coated with the white pollen of the Malati flowers, look like flying stars. The screwpine yields its beautiful flower-spathe in the rainy season. White like ivory, decorated by the shining black spots of bee-clusters, the spathe looks as if it is the crescent moon fallen from above, dislodged by being pressed between huge cloud masses.

There are refreshingly direct glances at nature without the passion for too elaborate a processing of first impressions. "Krishna was delighted to see the flight of parrots in the sky like a leafy festoon hung by the gods in his honour." Magha can forget his excessive ingenuity in evoking the reverie of the hour of dusk. The sun has set. Therefore the heat has subsided. The moon and the stars have not yet arisen, but darkness has not yet begun to spread. The creepers climbing on trees are stirred by a cool breeze in the gloaming and flocks of birds wing their way to their nests. It seems as if the trees are beckoning to the birds through their creeper-fingers to return to rest.

There are delightful rural vignettes too. We see the cowherds milking the cows with both hands, with the pail gripped between their knees, while the cows lick their calves, tied near by, and make their tawny skin gleam with a soft lustre. We hear the hiss of the stream of milk as it streaks into the pail just as, on quiet mornings, we hear the music of the churning rod. We see the harassed peasant women in the sunlit fields running to one end to chase away marauding cattle while flocks of birds settle down in the other corner.

But Magha is really more at home in dealing with aristocratic life. We witness the change of guard in the palace in the late hours of the night with the retiring sentry eager to turn in while his relief is leisurely yawning himself into wakefulness. Not unacceptable is the ingenuity in the description of the carousal in moonlight. "Before the wine cups had gone round, the moon was not mirrored in the cheeks of the damsels because both were alike of a golden colour. But with repeated libations, the cheeks are flushing red and the moon glows like a golden toilet mark." Genuinely martial in spirit is the description of the battle. "As the



hosts of Sisupala, in unbroken flow, with increasing clamour in their proud onslaught, advanced against the vast armies of Krishna, there arose a battle swaying to and fro, as when the waters of the rivers mingle with the foaming waves of the ocean . . . . The roar of the chariot, matching the thunder of the rain-cloud and filling the air, was eagerly echoed by the peacocks who stretched their necks and redoubled their loud calls . . . . Over a corpse that danced, blindly moving its hands midst the loud roll of the drums and the trumpets' clangour, the conch rang shrill as it laughed aloud."

While Bharavi and Magha drew their themes from the Maha Bharata, Bhatti and Kumaradasa turned to the Ramayana. Bhatti has been identified by some with Vatsa Bhatti who composed the Mandasor inscription.<sup>30</sup> But this has not found acceptance.<sup>31</sup> The most acceptable conclusion is that he lived, at the earliest, in the beginning of the sixth century, and, at the latest, in the middle of the seventh.<sup>32</sup>

Bhatti marks the dismal triumph of scholarship over poetic inspiration. In the *Ravana Vadha*,<sup>33</sup> (Slaying of Ravana), he relates in twenty cantos the entire story of the Ramayana up to Rama's return from Lanka and the coronation. But the extraordinary feature is that the epic has been written deliberately to illustrate rules of grammar and rhetoric. Literary sensibility may question such an ambition; but Bhatti, at least, is very pleased with himself. The work is, in his own words, a lamp to those whose eye is grammar; but without grammar, it is like a mirror in the hands of the blind. "This poem can be understood only by scholarly commentary. It suffices that it is a feast for the clever and that the stupid come to grief in it as a result of my love of learning."

Nevertheless, occasionally it becomes difficult to withhold our admiration from this writer, when we see that he can manage really fine poetic touches, even while teaching grammar to a reluctant readership. Here is an impressive profile of Ravana: "Like a lightning cloud, through the rays sparkling from his jewels, and emitting like it on all sides a deep dull resonance, the mighty prince sat on a high golden throne, radiant with many a gem, as the cloud clings to a pinnacle of Mount Sumeru." When the battle has resulted in carnage on either side, the more sober give



Ravana this advice: "Rama is aflame through Sita's abduction, we through the death of kinsfolk dear as ourselves. Let us make compact with our foe as flaming iron with flaming iron. Let Sita go free." But the most poignant moment is when Sita, in spite of her years of lonely suffering, has to undergo the fire-ordeal to prove her chastity to a cruel, suspicious world. "O wind, purifying all throughout the three worlds, moving amidst all creatures, know that my mind is free from sin. O waters, mighty purifiers, wandering ever in the air, sky and land, recognise that my thoughts are pure. O earth, constantly supporting all living beings, understand that my mind has not faltered by day or by night. O sun, lightening darkness, wandering through the clouds, drawing up the waters, witness to my actions. O ether, everywhere abiding, know what I have done and what not done. Lakshmana, make a funeral pyre, a medicine for my grievous woe. Let Rama be pleased with me today or, if I am tainted, let the fire make an end of me."

A late Ceylonese tradition of doubtful value identifies Kumara-dasa with an early sixth century ruler of Ceylon. This identification has not been found acceptable.<sup>34</sup> The indications are that he lived sometime between the last quarter of the eighth and the first quarter of the ninth century.<sup>35</sup> The text of his epic, *Janaki Harana*,<sup>36</sup> (Abduction of Sita) was first available only in a word-for-word Sinhalese gloss of the first fourteen cantos and a part of the fifteenth. Subsequently a manuscript running to twenty cantos was discovered in the Madras Government's Oriental Manuscript Library. Kumaradasa seems to have been an ardent admirer of Kalidasa and has closely modelled his epic on the latter's two epics. This may have started the legend that he was a contemporary and friend of Kalidasa.<sup>37</sup> There are echoes, close enough to risk being called plagiarisms, from the *Kumara Sambhava* in Kumaradasa's epic, especially in the love-dalliance of Rama and Sita. But it would be unfair to overstress the derivative character of the epic, for Kumaradasa frequently shows himself to be capable of fine, original touches. Above all, his alliterative verse recovers the musical flow of Kalidasa more successfully than the diction of the other later epics.

In the tropics, the setting sun scarcely ever sends out visible shafts of light, unless refracted by clouds, and seems to grow



in size just before it dips below the horizon. Kumaradasa's keen observation has recorded this optical phenomenon. "As the disc of the sun which has withdrawn all its rays gradually increases in bulk, it slowly sinks down in the water of the ocean as if on account of its heaviness." Similes and romantic overtones follow on the foundation of genuine observation. "The net of darkness everywhere surrounds the sun whose disc floats on the ocean, as a long circle of bees surrounds a full-blown lotus whose stalk is concealed by the water." To the weary traveller long separated from his beloved, the sun displays the brightness of an orb of a damsel's breast red with saffron powder. The moon rises slowly and the darkness can linger only in the shining black clour of the flock of sleeping cuckoos and the bees which gather, attracted by the fragrance of the opening night lotuses. "Filtering through the hundreds of openings in the net-work canopy of leaves, the fluid moonlight sprinkles the bases of trees. But in clearings where woodland altars had been raised, it appears as if poured down in a flood."

Not unworthy of Kalidasa is the description of spring by his admirer. The Champak inflorescences seem like lamp-stands, burning with thousands of lights, set up in the sylvan sites by spring. "The continuous line of black-bees attracted by the sweet fragrance and whirling about the apex of the Champaka buds looks like a line of smoke rising from the tip of a flame." The torpor of a late spring day is vividly caught. "Night perished, as a maiden languishes through severance from her lover in winter's cold, and in her place slow came the day, as though wearied by the fierce spring heat." Summer is the season when the kings seek the woods and lakes with their consorts. The beauty of the royal ladies is brought out through pardonable rhetoric. "If Brahma (the creator) looked at his handiwork, then love's darts must have pierced his heart. If he closed his eyes, he could not have seen to create. How then did he fashion the beauty of her limbs?" Sporting in the water, in a love-quarrel, a damsel's necklace gets broken and the pearls spill on a lotus leaf. But globed water drops are already shining there like pearls and she cannot distinguish her pearls which have fallen among them. There are some brilliant conceits in the description of the carousal. "In the wine-glass where the wine stirred gently, the mirrored moon



trembled as if smitten by the fever of love, overwhelmed by the desire to be lifted to her mouth, fragrant like a lotus." The real power of Kumaradasa comes out in the vigour of his descriptions of the carnage wrought by the demons among the hermits dwelling in the forests, to save whom Vishwamitra takes the warrior lads, Rama and Lakshmana. We come across "the earth scattered with skulls bearing tender shoots of young grass which have come out through the holes of the eye-sockets and the fractures of the half-buried skulls . . . . An idol, with its eyes enveloped in a transparent spider's web, looks as if with eyes swollen by frequent wailing."

In works like the *Hara Vijaya* of Ratnakara<sup>38</sup> (ninth century) the *Kapphinabhyudaya* of Ratnakara's younger contemporary, Sivasvamin,<sup>39</sup> and the *Srikantha Charita* of Mankhaka<sup>40</sup> (twelfth century), all from Kashmir, we have Kavyas written according to the prescriptions of treatises on rhetoric. The plots are extremely feeble, the defeat of a king by another or the slaying of some misbehaving demon by one of the gods. Descriptions of sunset and moonrise, love dalliance and battles fill out the lengths which sometimes reach stupendous dimensions as in Ratnakara's work which runs to fifty cantos. Sivasvamin perhaps deserves some special notice for the choice of an unusual theme. Though steeped in the philosophy of Kashmiri Saivism, he lauds the Buddha in his epic. King Kapphina of Dakshinapatha invades the territory of Prasenajit or Sravasthi, but is converted to Buddhism and pacifism by a miracle. Sivasvamin does not intend to labour hard for finding an excuse for padding his work with descriptions. When Kapphina has decided on war, a Vidyadhara friend of his invites him for a holiday in the Malaya mountain where all the six seasons simultaneously appear to honour the king. Poetic gleams are not wholly absent. "The tender sprout implored the fawn-eyed damsel, who was going to pluck it, through the hum of the bees: 'Why should you inflict an additional injury on me who have already been injured by the beauty of your lotus-like hand?'" Not unacceptable, though rhetorical, is the description of the moonlit night. "When the moon, passionately embracing the night, mounted the bed of the firmament, the quarters, free from darkness and shining bright, gradually stretched out (receded) like delighted companions moving away (when they saw that



the lovers were united)." Here is a profile of a merry-making maiden. "When the artless young maiden reeled in intoxication, she thought she was trembling with cold as she had quaffed the moon, by its nature cool as snow, reflected in the wine." Mature is the conclusion. Kapphina wants to enter the order of the monks. But the Buddha advises him not to renounce the world, but to practise selflessness in the discharge of his duties as the ruler of his kingdom. Sivasvamin has managed to synthesise here the Hindu doctrine of Dharma or duty and the Buddhist idea of release from the world's bondage. Buddha has become an incarnation like Krishna and teaches the same message.

Sriharsha (not to be confused with Emperor Harsha), of twelfth century Kanauj, was also a philosopher, for he has written treatises on logic and Vedanta. But, if his *Naishadha Charita*<sup>41</sup> passes in review a number of philosophical doctrines including those of the Buddhists, Jains and Charvakas, he does not manage an integration like Sivasvamin, but merely parades his scholarship which, it must be admitted, is impressive. His lack of genuine poetic intuition is revealed by the fact that though he selects the exquisite story of Nala and Damayanti, he closes with the marriage and leaves out the poignant later vicissitudes of the lovers. The slender and comparatively less important section of the story is expanded into twenty-two cantos. Literary ingenuity of a highly order is indeed present. Four gods attracted by Damayanti's beauty, also turn up at the Swayamvara, looking just like Nala. Sarasvati conducts Damayanti round and describes the various suitors to her. The stanzas describing the five Nalas have a two-fold meaning, overtly applying to Nala, but characterising at the same time each of the four gods who pose as Nala. But, unless Damayanti was as skilled in rhetoric as she was beautiful, she could not have got the hint. There is a lengthy description of Damayanti's beauty, a regular inventory of all her charms from her tresses to her toenails. But this uninhibited description is put in the mouth of Nala himself who is supposed to view her, unobserved. The passages on love-dalliance are sections of the Book of Erotics versified. Nevertheless, a lingering sensibility occasionally gleams through the stifling scholarship. "Drink thou deep with thine eyes, that are fair as the night-lotus, the moon that doth serve to mirror the loveliness of thy face, O lady with thighs as fair as young plan-



tain shoots . . . . See, beloved, how, for a moment hidden though it be by the curtain of the summit of the mountain, the moon doth spare the rain of its beams to quench the thirst of the Chakora birds (according to poetic convention these birds live by sipping rain drops only) . . . . Just fancy that these beams are maidens who have sought at the foot of the trees in the dusk secret meetings with their lovers; now laying aside their dark garments as though they were the shadow, they move in raiment that matches the moonlight."

If they lack poetic sensibility, scholars are capable of enormous industry and the succeeding centuries yielded a great number of Kavyas. But it is neither necessary, nor possible in a work like this, to comment on them in detail. A rapid listing of the more important productions will have to suffice. The Ramayana continued to furnish the themes for many writers, like Chakrakavi<sup>42</sup> (seventeenth century) and Kavimalla<sup>43</sup> (fourteenth century). The Maha Bharata was the source for Amara Chandra Suri,<sup>44</sup> Vastupala<sup>45</sup> and Deva Prabha Suri,<sup>46</sup> all belonging to the thirteenth century, besides a host of others. Krishnananda<sup>47</sup> and Vamana Bhatta Bana<sup>48</sup> rehandled the story of Nala and Damayanti. The Krishna legend yielded many Kavyas, among others by Lolimba Raja<sup>49</sup> (eleventh century) Venkata Desika<sup>50</sup> (fourteenth century), Raja Chudamani Dikshita<sup>51</sup> (seventeenth century) and Krishnadasa Kaviraja.<sup>52</sup> In a Kavya by Gokula,<sup>53</sup> even the austere Siva becomes irresistible to the ladies, like Krishna. But Nilakantha Dikshita, in his two epics,<sup>54</sup> sings of the more austere Siva. Whole series of Kavyas emerge in a specialised diction characterised by assonance and alliteration, like those by Niti Varman<sup>55</sup> and Vasudeva Bhattathiri.<sup>56</sup> The ten incarnations yield Kavya-like compositions like those by Kshemendra<sup>57</sup> and Narayana Bhattathiri.<sup>58</sup> Works like those of Jayadratha<sup>59</sup> are not strictly Kavyas but legends on the Puranic model. Bhatti's dubious ambition to teach grammar through epic poetry inspired others also like Bhatta Bhauma,<sup>60</sup> Halayudha<sup>61</sup> and Vasudeva Bhattathiri.<sup>62</sup> The first narrates a fight between Ravana and Kartaviryarjuna and teaches Panini's grammar, which is also the inner core of the work of the last, though the Krishna legend is the overt theme. Halayudha eulogised a Rashtrakuta king and gave a metrical guide to poets in the employment of verbal forms. The nadir of sen-



sibility and the climax of scholarship were reached in works which sought to narrate more than one story simultaneously using the rare capacity of Sanskrit for double meaning. Sandhyakara Nandi<sup>63</sup> wrote in the eleventh century a work which gave the story of Rama as well as King Ramapala of Bengal. In the twelfth century, Dhananjaya<sup>64</sup> gave a simultaneous narration of the stories of both Ramayana and Maha Bharata. In the sixteenth century Chidambara<sup>65</sup> went one better, combining the two epics as well as the Bhagavata. The most astonishing and even appalling performances of this type were the Kavyas which punned their way implacably to depict simultaneously the themes of erotic love and ascetic renunciation. Ramachandra<sup>66</sup> and Soma Prabhacharya<sup>67</sup> are among those who have presented us with such doubtful gifts.

#### V. *Historical Epics*

Epics based on historical themes deserve special mention as they form a separate category of Kavyas. The early eulogistic poems on the occasion of royal gifts and ceremonies were the origin of this species which was later swelled into epic length by the influence of the Kavya form and style. Kalhana mentions that Sankuka, in the eighth century, had written an epic, *Bhuvanabhyudaya*, describing the terrible conflict between the regents of Kashmir, Mamma and Utpala. If this work had survived, it would have been the first historical epic and more truly historical than the first that has survived, the *Nava Sahasanka Charita*<sup>68</sup> of Padma Gupta (also called Parimala), composed in 1005 in honour of the Paramara king, Sindhu Raja of Dhara, who was also called Nava Sahasanka. Apart from the fact that the poem is supposed to have a living figure as hero, it is a blend of fable and legend. The Naga princess Sasi Prabha finds her pet deer pierced by an arrow on which she reads the name of King Nava Sahasanka. The king, in his turn, in pursuit of the deer, comes to a lake and finds a swan with a pearl necklace in its beak which bears the name of the princess. They meet and the king has to kill the demon Vajramkusa and bring the golden lotus from his pleasure pond before he gains the princess. The royal patron may have been gratified by all this, but we can accept the form only as a



Kavya, not as a historical epic.

Bilhana from Kashmir, who visited many courts in search of patronage, at last came to Kalyani and composed his *Vikramanka Deva Charita*<sup>69</sup> in 1088, in honour of its king, Vikramaditya VI. The romantic tendency is in greater control here. He gives an account of the Chalukya dynasty, describes the exploits of his patron's father, Ahavamalla, and dwells at length on Vikrama's exploits when he was a prince, his marriage with a Chola princess and expeditions in South India, and his accession after a fratricidal war. Vikrama is described as conquering distant Gauda and Kamarupa which he never did, but at least he does not go off to joust with demons as in Padma Gupta. Bilhana cannot also resist the Kavya influence and Vikrama's winning of his queen Chandralekha takes up seven cantos, expanded with the help of the familiar ingredients, minute descriptions of the heroine's charms, of seasons, water sports and carousals. Nevertheless, he avoids the fantastic and can often speak in simple moving accents. These are Ahavamalla's last words: "I know that my life, tremulous as the tip of an elephant's ear, is gone. No other hope have I save in Parvati's Lord. In the bosom of the Tungabhadra river I desire to lay aside this deception of human life, my heart set fast on Siva." Simple in diction, again, is the description of the seasons. "Then came the winter, feudatory of our lord, Love, and beloved by the crescent moon, dear to those who are weary of autumn's lingering heat." We get close to the poet when we see him musing on Kashmir, the home-land which he had left long ago. "What shall I sing of that spot, the fountainhead of wonder tales that shone as a jewel on the crest of the mountain-god (Himalayas), the father-in-law of Siva? One region bears the saffron in its natural perfection, another the grape, pale as a slice of juicy sugar-cane from Sarayu's banks." He also speaks up for poets as a class. "Ye lords of earth, prosperity, the lightning of the cloud of fate that moves at its own will, cannot be chained. Ever soundeth the drum that doth proclaim the hour of man's departure. Honour, therefore, and take as your guides, laying aside all pride, those skilled poets whose poems provide the drink of immortality to your bodies of fame."

As a historical epic, the *Raja Tarangini*<sup>70</sup> (River of Kings) written by the Kashmirian, Kalhana, near about 1150, stands far



above the other works claiming to be in that category. Kalhana set before himself a difficult task: meeting the demands of historical accuracy and the requirements of a creative literary work. He has recorded that he has done his best to avoid errors "by studying the inscriptions recording the consecrations of temples and grants by former kings, the laudatory inscriptions and written documents."<sup>71</sup> Going through the available histories, he found that "the narrative of past events had become fragmentary in many respects." His ambition was to produce a work which would be reliable and useful where the other narratives regarding the times of the various rulers were vague and contradictory. His work attests to his patient research. The topographical details show that he had visited every region which he has described, unlike the Roman historian Livy who never looked at any of the battlefields he described.

To give Kashmir the dignity of an antique past, Kalhana does begin with kings of the Maha Bharata period whose historicity may be doubtful. Occasionally he accepts clearly impossible folk traditions which made some rulers live for three hundred years. But these difficulties disappear when he moves nearer to his own period. The twelfth century was a very disturbed period in Kashmir. King Harsha had begun well; but later, his Nero-like propensities provoked revolt. The brothers Sussala and Uccala from a branch line, the Lohara house, overthrew him. Harsha was murdered by a soldier. The country was divided into Lohara and Kashmir between the brothers. Sussala, in Kashmir, was ousted by the usurper Bhikshasara, was restored, then murdered. He was succeeded by his son Jayasinha whose greatest problem was to control the Damaras or feudal barons from Lohara who continued to pillage the country.

"That noble-minded poet alone merits praise whose word, like the sentence of a judge, keeps free from love or hatred in recording the past," says Kalhana in the opening line of his work.<sup>72</sup> On the whole, he has realised this impartiality not only with respect to the earlier period but also regarding contemporary history. His own family had been raised to a high position by Harsha, but he has not spared that ruler when he later became an oppressor.

A whole troubled epoch rises to view in Kalhana's verses. We see the panoply of the middle ages, the feudal knights in glittering



armour, quixotic chivalry and disgusting cruelty, loyalty unto death and senseless treachery. We read of royal amours and intrigues and of fighting and militant and adulterous queens. The tones become sombre when we come to the contemporary period. He shows a masterly grasp of the slimy politics of a small principality with its hostile factions, its usual course of intrigue, strife, treason, assassination and massacre. And he can ably depict the characters who throng and fight within its limited arena, its series of royal debauchees, treacherous sycophants, plotting ministers, unruly barons, intriguing priests, disloyal soldiers and uninhibited ladies.

The Rajput soldiers whom the kings maintained as a Praetorian Guard were, frankly, mercenaries. But Kalhana notes that at least they were free from cowardice, unlike the native soldiery. His sarcasm becomes Rabelaisian when he describes the performance of the latter. We read of armies which disperse at the sight or at even the rumour of a resolute foe, of rival forces which both tremble in fear of each other. The mercenaries bribe the local captains who sap the morale of their men by talking ill of the leaders, claim privileges when rations are distributed and cause affrays. When armies in flight plunge into the Madhumati, the abandoned linen looks like rows of geese, the shields like lotuses and swords like reeds choking the river.

The turbulent feudal land-holders were the greatest source of trouble in Kalhana's times and they are called "robbers" by the poet. As for the priests, Kalhana found that their arrogance was equalled only by their ignorance. In civil wars they always supported the winner. But Kalhana reserves his greatest contempt for the official class. Most of them were of low origin. Here is a Rabelaisian profile of Bhadresvara who rose high in royal favour. "This man's proper hereditary occupation as a gardener had been to trade in night-soil, to act as a butcher, to sell fuel, etc. Then for a living he had hung at the back of officials, carrying their bags or ink-bottles, while a rough woollen cloth rubbed his own back."<sup>73</sup> Sycophancy raised such people to great heights. They ruined the country by their exactions. Thus Jayapida is told by his officials that it is quite unnecessary to undertake risky wars to amass wealth while his subjects were there to pay through the nose. Caught between the kings, priests, officials and mercenary



soldiers, the people became utterly lethargic and indifferent. The only occasions on which they showed some energy were when they could join in some pillage. Kalhana is virulently sarcastic when he describes such episodes. The hooligans from the slums storm into a palace, greedily swallow camphor taking it to be white sugar and burn gold brocade in the hope of extracting the gold.

If Kalhana dedicated himself to historical accuracy and impartiality, he was also consciously writing a Kavya. But his sense of artistic propriety kept him away from the florid idiom of the literary epic. He himself has stated that a narrative of such length ruled out a heavy overlay of literary ornament. Here he was perhaps being unduly modest. His own tastes were for the concise and the graphic and his style is ideally suited to the narration of a story filled with incidents. If imagery is resorted to, it is judicious and apt, as in the description of the funeral procession of Ananta. "The moving images of the people, reflected in the ornaments of the hearse, made it appear as if they were close to the king and striving to follow him."<sup>74</sup> The graphic quality of the image, its visual truth, should be noted. The flight of Prince Bhoja to the desolate country of the Dards in 1144 is described thus: "The points of icy rock encompassed him like the teeth of death. Like the net of destruction the dark night of the clouds surrounded him. Like herds of elephants snowdrifts flung their weight against him. The spray of the waterfalls smote him like arrowshots. The skin, that guards the blood, burst open beneath the force of the drifting storm. His eyes were blinded by the glitter of the sun on the snowfields." Mostly he manages this graphic power even without the help of imagery. Here is a profile of Harsha in his defeat. "He who had lived so long in regal luxury was perspiring in the heat, the sweat doubled by fright. His attendants had to replace again and again the armour which slipped from his shoulders. Repeatedly he drew back the arm which had lost its hold on the reins in order to keep back the horse which was urged on by the touch of his unsteady heels."<sup>75</sup> Kalhana had mused over the power of poetry to restore the pageant of the past. "Homage we pay to the innate wonder of the poet's art without whose favour are forgotten even those mighty kings, in the shadow of whose strong arms the earth, girdled by the ocean, lay secure as under the forest trees." But there is no flamboyant rhetoric in his mus-



ings over the departed glory of the once mighty Sahi dynasty. "Nothing is impossible to fate. It effects with ease what even in dreams appears incredible, what fancy fails to reach. Today one asks whether that great Sahi kingdom, with its kings, ministers and its court, it ever was or was not."<sup>76</sup> To enliven his narrative, like Herodotus, he uses soliloquies and, like Thucydides, great orations, which give dramatic power to the poem and seem like genuine utterances taken down by a reporter, because of their truth to character. When Uccala ousted him, Harsha, once a great ruler, and still great in spite of his degeneracy, contemplates his predicament in a powerful oration. "When fate arrives whose way has to be followed even by the gods, what grief is that for a mortal? . . . . What torments me is that this land, after having been like a virtuous woman, should have fallen like a prostitute into the arms of the insolent."

Kalhana had to define and solve the problem of the meaning of history and the crucial issue involved in it: whether historical truth and particularisation should or should not preclude the search for a generalised meaning, whether narration should or should not soar to reflection. He felt that history, which was really the experience of humanity over millennial periods, had great lessons to teach man. On the lower plane of organised political life, of statescraft, he found that lack of preparation, hesitation and action not quick enough, could bring disaster to a realm. The long-term study of history, he felt, clearly showed that evil brought inexorable retribution. It was the heavy fiscal exactions of Harsha, necessitated by an extravagant court, and the cruel oppression of the Damaras, the landed aristocracy, that led to the rebellion under the leadership of the brothers Uccala and Sussala. Sussala went the same way and paved the way for Bhikshasara's usurpation. Kalhana's sympathies are clearly with the usurper and against Sussala. With the Hindu tradition as a background, absorbed since childhood, it is not surprising that Kalhana should seek the roots of present evil in past lives. But heredity plays the same role in the crimes and punishments of the house of the Attridae which Aeschylus handled in his tremendous trilogy. The tones do become sombre. "What neither dream nor the juggler's art could produce, spring up, the marvel of mysterious working from the dark depths of ancient deeds." But Kalhana was dealing



with a sombre period in history just as Tacitus was dealing with a sombre period in Roman history. And if the verdicts of both are sombre, let us not forget that they are, ultimately, verdicts on responsibility abdicated, not expressions of faith in an inexorable fatality which always cancelled human effort.

The historian and the poet, the investigator of historical truth and the seeker after poetic values and meaning, blend at last into one integrated personality in a unified perspective. The Kavya should have a dominant emotion or mood to which all else, episodes, character and descriptions, should be ancillary. History also exhaled a mood. "Fortune, the beloved of kings, creates eager desires and brings to ruin the man of high mind." The sparked ambition may create empires, but they vanish so utterly that men wonder whether they ever existed. Kalhana started with the ideal of being both historian and poet. He thought he had found the meaning of history. "To begin with there is nothing, certain it is that hereafter there is nothing. During the interval, by chance, the living being reacts swiftly to the controlling states of pleasure and pain. Like an actor who had acted his part repeatedly, a particular living being disappears behind the screen of existence—nor do we know where he goes." We return to the existentialist outlook of Maha Bharata. But, as in that epic, Kalhana's answer also is positive. There is no flight from responsibility, from the categorical imperative of the altruistic deed. The meaning found by the historian supplies the *leit-motiv* to the poet. "Things come into being; in a moment they are destroyed. The sentiment of tranquil acceptance (Santa Rasa) presides like a sovereign over this work." But this acceptance does not mean lethargy or passivity. It involves detachment from ego-centered drives, and altruistic action. Four out of the eight books of Kalhana's epic end with the depiction of characters who, after having tried to mould the world to their desires and having had reasonable measure of success, liberated themselves from the stream of endless, ego-centered willing and took to lives of quiet piety and service.

No subsequent historical epic ever reached the level of Kalhana's poem. The decline is immediately felt in the continuations of Kalhana's narrative itself by Jonaraja, Srivara and Prajyabhatta respectively.<sup>77</sup> *Prithviraja Vijaya*,<sup>78</sup> of unknown date and author-



ship, has for its hero Prithvi Raj of Delhi who fell fighting against Ghoris in 1193. Rudra<sup>79</sup> wrote a work eulogising the rulers of Mayuragiri. Two women, Ramabhadramba,<sup>80</sup> a mistress of the Nayak ruler of Tanjore and Ganga Devi,<sup>81</sup> a queen of Vijayanagar, also contributed works of this category, the theme of the latter being the conquest of Madura by her husband. Jain writers made profuse contribution in this species. Hema Chandra<sup>82</sup> in the twelfth century wrote a long work on the rulers of Anhilvad. Vastupala, the brilliant minister of the Vaghela ruler of Gujarat of the thirteenth century, is the hero of works by Somesvara,<sup>83</sup> Arisimha<sup>84</sup> and Balachandra Suri.<sup>85</sup> In the fourteenth century, Naya Chandra Suri<sup>86</sup> wrote a work with Hammira, the Rajput hero, as his hero. Of short compositions eulogising particular kings without touching upon dynastic histories, there is an astonishing abundance, explained by the fact that this was the main source of livelihood of versifiers in feudal times.



## CHAPTER TEN

## Drama

*I. Origins*

AMONG THE many problems connected with the history of Sanskrit literature, the one which has led to the most extensive controversy is probably the question of the origins of the dramatic tradition.

Weber and Windisch put forward the theory that Greek drama, brought to India in the wake of Alexander's conquest, was the originating influence. Greek sculpture inspired Gandhara art and therefore there is nothing intrinsically impossible in the theory. But the criticisms of Pischel, Keith<sup>1</sup> and Tarn<sup>2</sup> do make it highly improbable. The terms, "Yavani" for the female bodyguard of the harem and "Yavanika" for curtain, and the similarity of the plots of Sanskrit romantic comedy and of the New Attic Comedy of Menander and Philemon, do seem suggestive, but the resemblance in plots can be a convergence and Greek drama, so far as we know, did not use a curtain. Further, even in Sanskrit drama, the Yavanika was not used like a modern curtain, but was a partition between the green room and the stage, as Abhinava Gupta<sup>3</sup> has clearly stated.

There is a wealth of cues which suggest that drama could have emerged from indigenous background as a normal evolution. The dialogue hymns of the Rig Veda, like the exchanges between Pururavas and Urvashi, are strongly suggestive. But recent thought has not been willing to accept the theory built up by Levi,<sup>4</sup> von Schroeder, Hillebrandt, Hertel, Oldenberg and others that these hymns were recited and mimed by priests in a protean dramatic form somewhat like the Mystery Play of Europe. The modified form of the theory, put forward by Konow, Pischel and others is that Vedic ritual drama itself was borrowed from a popular mime of antiquity or from shadow and puppet plays. Pischel thinks that the Sutradhara (manager or director) of the Sanskrit play was originally the showman of the puppet play, since the word suggests something to do with strings. But the Yajur Veda, which was in intimate touch with the life of the common people and which lists



all conceivable occupations, does not mention actors or puppet players.<sup>5</sup> Jagirdar<sup>6</sup> has given a more plausible suggestion. According to him, the Sutradhara of the drama is the later evolution of the Suta or bard who recited the ballads that ultimately developed into the epic histories. The Suta has been described as the man who decided the "time and place where the measurements were to be taken" for such recitals and therefore he may have used the carpenter's line for measuring out the platforms and stages. The immediate derivation of the drama, therefore, seems to have been from ballad poetry. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that Patanjali, in the second century B.C. mentions dramatic representations of the Krishna legend, especially the killing of Kamsa. Though the references in Patanjali are not detailed, unfortunately, they are sufficient to prove that a primitive form of drama had come into existence by that time. We hear of the actor; his hunger is as proverbial as the dancing of the peacock and it was not a rare thing for him to receive blows. We also read of specialists who played female roles, though classical drama, later, preferred to have women themselves for the feminine roles.

Bharata's *Natya Sastra*<sup>7</sup> (Theory of Dramaturgy) is the earliest complete source we have on Indian drama. It has been ascribed various dates ranging from the second century B.C. to the second century A.D. It is a more thorough work than that of Aristotle on Greek drama and covers all aspects of dramatic production. Bharata's categorisation of dramatic forms on the basis of four *Vrittis*<sup>8</sup> is very interesting. Raghavan<sup>9</sup> has shown that the *Vrittis* are definite stages in the development of the drama in its evolution towards the classical form. Action was separately developing in dance and pantomime shows. These were without speech, which, however, was available in bardic recitals. Both forms must have been popular at festivals and they could have coalesced later. Jagirdar<sup>10</sup> has elaborated these suggestions. In his opening chapter itself, Bharata says that Sanskrit drama arose as part of the festival of Indra's Banner (represented by a huge decorated pole) and that the earliest dramatic representation had for its theme the victory of the gods over the demons. This confirms what was said earlier about the derivation of drama from the ballad tradition, for such legends of battles and heroism were the staple themes of ballads. In the subsequent evolution, the *Bharati Vritti* could



have been the earliest stage. "It consists of mere speeches or recitation and is only played by men. There are to be no ladies at all. The actors participate under their own names." Here we have pure recitation without representation or made up roles. It is nearest to the ballad recital, probably the only difference being that there was a group of men instead of a single bard, with a consequent implication of antiphonal division of parts and also pantomime. In the Satyati Vritti, "whenever there is an emotional context, it is accompanied by speech and acting." It is emphasized that the acting should bring out the emotion. Here, therefore, we have recitation which is evolving into a histrionic presentation. In the Kaisiki Vritti, "there are females in the representation, plenty of music and dance, representation of love affairs and lastly there are beautiful costumes and make up." Here we have romantic comedy complete with costume and actresses for the female parts. "The Kaisiki, since it deals with love themes and requires beautiful costumes, is impossible to be staged by men alone, without women." In the Arabhati, the themes and episodes have a greater range and we get indications of a permanent setting or stage which will enable effective representation. Bharata devotes one whole chapter<sup>11</sup> to theatre architecture. He describes three kinds of theatre, the rectangular, the square and the triangular, with their measurements. Detailed descriptions are given of the auditorium, the acting portion of the stage, side spaces, place for orchestra and green-room. Attention is paid to the seating as well as the acoustics of the house.<sup>12</sup> As the stylised production involved minute gesticulation and as he did not seek spectacular effects Bharata did not require large halls.

As the soul of this completely orchestrated presentation glows the Rasa, or dominant emotional flavour. Everything is ancillary to its development. Bharata shows the profoundest psychological and aesthetic insight in outlining the theory of the aesthetic emotions, the selection of the stimuli that can generate them, the light and shade of their modification, their tonal variation in different situations, the temporary discords that, if introduced with an infallible taste, can actually build up their strength. The supreme pioneering success of Bharata, who laid the foundations of so many literary and dramatic disciplines, was in the field of poetics. For the brilliant tradition of Indian poetics was built upon the cues



thrown out by him. The study of poetics, however, has to be postponed to a later occasion.

Sanskrit drama proliferated into many types. Bharata mentions ten main varieties known in his time.<sup>13</sup> The typology is generally clear, but, in a few cases, rather blurred.<sup>14</sup> The generic term of the drama is *Rupaka*. Among its various forms, the highest is the *Nataka*. The heroic or erotic *Nataka*, usually consisting of five to ten acts, is given a legendary theme and a hero of elevated rank. The *Prakarana* is also a full-fledged form, but it is a comedy of manners of a rank below royalty, with an invented plot and characters drawn from the middle class or even lower social grades. Thus the main division seems to be between the heroic drama and the social play. The *Anka*, *Samavakara*, *Vyayoga*, *Dima*, and *Ihamriga* belong to the heroic type. It is here that the typology is not too clear. *Anka* is a single act with pathos as the dominant mood, showing the after-effects of battles, with women wailing. But it can have a happy ending. The *Samavakara* is a play in three acts, dealing with the fights of gods with demons. The stories of the three acts need not be parts of the same theme. The *Vyayoga* is also a military spectacle with heroic (not divine) characters from the epics. It is restricted to one act, one action and a duration of one day. The *Dima*, inadequately described, also seems to have been a heroic play, but in four acts and with a greater range of moods. The *Ihamriga* is a play of intrigue in four acts dealing with the pursuing of a maiden by a divine or human hero. We have no early examples of most of these forms and have to come down to the twelfth century when Vatsa Raja wrote one play in each of these forms. He chose the story of the churning of the Ocean of Milk for a *Samavakara*, Siva's fight with the *Tripura* demons for a *Dima* and *Rukmini's* elopement with *Krishna* for an *Ihamriga*.

The *Prahasana*, *Bhana* and *Vithi* are social types like the *Prakarana*. The *Prahasana* is a one-act farce dealing with roguery of low characters and often takes a satirical turn. The *Bhana* is also a one-act play, erotic in character, but with only one hero-actor. It is carried on in monologue, the theme progressing by a chain of answers given by him to queries by unseen (unrepresented) characters. The *Vithi* is very much like the *Bhana* and may be performed by one actor, though *Dhananjaya* allows two. It



can also have a greater range of sentiments.

- ✓ In course of time, more forms emerged. These were termed Upa-Rupakas to distinguish them from the major forms, the Rupakas. An Upa-Rupaka like the Nataka is noticed by Bharata himself.<sup>15</sup> The earliest to notice the later forms was Kohala who wrote a sequel to the *Natya Sastra*, the *Uttara Tantra*. That work has been lost, but it has been quoted by Abhinava and other writers. Sarada Tanaya<sup>16</sup> points out that not all these later forms can be dismissed as minor types. But, broadly, the distinction
- ✓ remains valid. Hema Chandra has written at length on the technical differences between the Rupaka and the Upa-Rupaka.<sup>17</sup> We need not go into details but can accept Dhananjaya's perceptive analysis<sup>18</sup> that the distinction rests mainly on whether any type stands nearer to the ballet or to the full-fledged drama. Nritta is pure dance. The Tandava was first mere dance, in a very vigorous tempo, as opposed to the slow Lasya. But Abhinava<sup>19</sup> points out, quoting Kohala, that with the faintest suggestion of a context or episodic background, the dance becomes an incipient dramatic form. Thus the Tandava dance approached the latter form when the story of Siva's annihilation of the Tripura demons was sung by Narada and, closely following it, Siva danced and rendered the story through the symbolic representation of mimetic dance.
- \* Nritta or pure dance now becomes Nrittya, mimetic dance with gestures and emotional evocation. Natya (drama) however is a far more complex form which integrates Nrittya as one of its elements and integrates it with speech, dialogues, stage sets, etc.
- ✓ The Katha Kali of Kerala is an evolution of the Tandava into a ballet. Ballet forms emerged in profusion as the centuries went by.<sup>20</sup> Rasa Kavya is one of the earliest forms mentioned. Chalita appears in Kalidasa. Dandi mentions Samya. Others are recorded by Somesvara and Bhoja and, following them, by Parsva Deva,<sup>21</sup> Jaya Sena<sup>22</sup> and others. If the ballet forms moved away from the more complex and more fully integrated Nataka by relying more and more on music and dance, the social play and farce moved away, in another direction, by accepting more and more realism (Loka Dharmi) and surrendering that stylisation which Nataka achieved by its insistence on the aesthetic conventions of drama-turgy (Natya Dharmi).

From the study of the origins of the drama we can now pass



on to the dramas themselves. If the dramas of Asvaghosha had been recovered in their entirety, they would have deserved a whole section for themselves, for the classical form has reached fairly full maturity in these works of the first or second century. But the palm-leaf manuscripts discovered in Central Asia contain only fragments. Out of the three plays that have come down to us, the *Sariputra* (or *Saradvatiputra*) *Prakarana*<sup>23</sup> mentions Asvaghosha as the author in its colophon. The other two plays do not have any such definitive indication of authorship, but scholars have generally agreed that they were written by Asvaghosha. In the first drama, *Sariputra* has an interview with Asvajit when he comes to hear about the Buddha. He then discusses the claims of the Buddha to be a teacher with his friend, the *Vidushaka*, who raises the objection that a Brahmin like *Sariputra* should not accept the teaching of a *Kshatriya*. *Sariputra* does not heed the objection and he and his friend, *Maudgalyayana*, go to the Buddha and receive instruction. A *Prakarana* in nine acts, this play, with its *Vidushaka*, whose role in Sankrit drama is not unlike that of the Clown or Fool in Elizabethan drama, its use of Prakrits for the ordinary characters and other features, affords clear testimony that the Sanskrit drama had reached the classical form even at this early date. The second play is an allegory which introduces characters like *Buddhi* (Wisdom), *Kirti* (Fame) and *Dhriti* (Firmness). Krishna Misra will use the form much later in his *Prabodha Chandrodaya*. It is difficult to reconstruct the story of the third play from the fragments. But it seems to have been a middle-class comedy like *Sudraka's Clay Cart* which we shall study later. A hetaera named *Magadhavati* is the heroine and the play is complete with a *Vidushaka*, already a gourmet, a villain, a maid servant and a prince. The play may have been intended for religious edification, for Buddha's disciples, *Sariputra* and *Maudgalyayana*, also appear in it.

## II. Bhasa and Sudraka

Till the first decade of the present century, Bhasa remained a familiar, but intriguing name: familiar because Kalidasa, Bana and a host of others refer to him as a great dramatist<sup>24</sup>; intriguing because no play of his was available. Then in 1909, Ganapati



✓ Sastri discovered palm-leaf manuscripts of ten plays in an old manor house near Padmanabha Puram, some twenty miles from Cape Comorin. Further investigation brought to light three more plays. All the thirteen plays were published by him as the works of Bhasa.<sup>25</sup> This sensational event in the history of Sanskrit research led to wide-spread controversy in which Barnett,<sup>26</sup> Thomas,<sup>27</sup> Winternitz,<sup>28</sup> Hirananda Sastri<sup>29</sup> and a host of others participated. Some questioned the ascription of any of these plays to Bhasa. Others had reservations only about certain selected plays. The arguments for and against Bhasa are reviewed by Pusalker.<sup>30</sup> The dust of that controversy has settled down today ✓ and the great majority of scholars accept the plays as Bhasa's. But the difficulties of the problem cannot be underrated as has been made clear by De.<sup>31</sup> ✓ The best guess about his date is early fourth century.

Bhasa took the plots for the majority of his plays from the epic histories and the Puranas. The *Bala Charita* deals with the exploits of Krishna culminating with the slaying of Kamsa and thus recalls Patanajali's references to the early plays based on the Krishna legend. The *Maha Bharata* provided the material for several plays like *Pancha Ratra*, *Madhyama Vyayoga*, *Duta Ghatokacha*, *Duta Vakya*, *Karna Bhara* and *Uru Bhanga*. The Ramayana story provided the plots for *Pratima Nataka* and *Abhisheka Nataka*. But everywhere Bhasa introduces bold modifications to serve his dramatic purpose. For instance, in *Pratima*, he makes Rama and Ravana meet earlier to the abduction. Rama pursues the golden deer, not to satisfy an obstinate whim of Sita, but to make a valued offering to the manes of his father. There is also no cruel rejection of Sita immediately after the victory. But the boldest change is in the characterization of Kaikeyi. She demands the throne for far-reaching historical purposes, the destruction of the oppressive regime of Ravana. She willingly accepts the martyrdom of the hatred of the public which interprets her motive as pure greed. The cruellest irony is that she has to face the barbed words of her own son Bharata, flying thick like arrows. "Hast thou not brought upon me disgrace and dishonour, on my noble father death at the hands of his dearest, on all Ayodhya ceaseless lamentation, exile on Lakshmana, sorrow on the noble ladies, who love their children, for the cruel journey



imposed on their daughter-in-law, and on thyself the hateful reproach of a shameful deed?" In *Pancha Ratra*, in the battle in connection with the cow-raid of Duryodhana, Abhimanyu, Arjuna's son, who is fighting on the side of the Kurus, is taken prisoner by his uncle Bhima and this leads to a very dramatic scene between father and son. The legend-cycle about Udayana, King of Vatsa, was shaped by Bhasa into two plays, completely different. The *Svapna Vasavadatta* is a moving romantic comedy, while the *Pratijna Yaugandharayana* is a powerful play of political intrigue. In *Avi Maraka*, Bhasa adopts a folk story to create a romantic comedy. It deals with the love of a plebeian for a princess, though the plebeian turns out at last to be a prince. Fairy-tale elements are freely introduced to heighten the poetic quality.

Sanskrit drama is essentially poetic drama. The absence of elaborate scenery demanded the heightening of the poetic quality in descriptive passages, as in Elizabethan drama. Bhasa reveals superb descriptive powers, especially in the evocation of nature, unspoilt by any flamboyant rhetoric. In the *Abhisheka Nataka* we share the excitement of Rama's army when it reaches the sea. "Here is the ocean, sleeping like Vishnu, on a sapphire-blue bed, billows breaking into foam, and possessed of a thousand arms, in the shape of rivers." In the *Avi Maraka*, a Vidyadhara (angel) is flying through the air with his consort, Saudamini. There is a fine realisation of aerial perspective. "Look, Saudamini! How charming is the earth below! Huge mountains look like babe elephants and the vast seas like small swimming pools. Trees resemble mosses and lichens. The small hills and gorges have vanished. Rivers look like boundary lines and huge palaces look like glistening dew-drops." As they make a swift descent, the Vidyadhara tells his consort, "The clouds seem to flee from us, and the earth, with its seas and mountains, to fly towards us to greet us." In the same play, we have a fine description of the sunset. "The eastern quarter is tinged with black, while the west gleams with the evening red. What a beautiful thing the world is! It wipes from its brow the Tilak (red spot of saffron) and puts on the blue mantle bespangled with stars. It exchanges the burning heat of the day for the cool delicious breeze and changes from a world of work and trade into a world of interlaced lovers." In the *Svapna Vasavadatta*, we have another mood, twilight descend-



ing on a hermitage. "The birds have all retired to their nests. The hermits lave their tired limbs in ponds. The fires are lighted and blaze cheerfully. The smoke makes its way through the grove." The darkness of the midnight hour, when Krishna is born, is described by Vasudeva in *Bala Charita*. "Darkness anoints my limbs. The sky, it seems is raining lamp-black. My sight is useless. The quarters are invisible and the trees form one solid mass. The familiar world is utterly transformed." It should be noted that Bhasa is always on guard against the merely poetic which serves no dramatic function. Here this description of night comes naturally from Vasudeva who has to venture into it carrying Krishna to safety away from the clutches of Kamsa. Similarly the lover going of his tryst in *Avi Maraka* exclaims: "How fearsome is this midnight! Trees can only be detected by touch. The streets look like streams flowing across a country of darkness. One can swim across this darkness." But the moon rises to dispel the darkness in *Charudatta*. "Here rises the moon, the night light of the sky's highway, the beacon of young women, pale yellow, like ripe dates. Its white beams soak into the darkness, like streams of milk on dried up mire." The moon sets in a later act of the same play. "The crescent moon gives place to darkness and sets, like the curved tusk of a wild elephant gradually submerging in a pool, as the animal plunges in the water." We get a glimpse of the autumnal sky in *Svapna Vasavadatta*. King Udayana sees a line of <sup>cranes</sup> flying at great speed across the cloudless sky. "Now the line is straight, now it is broken; now the flight is upward; now it swings low. This line of birds divides the sky in two. The sky is spotless like the belly of a snake that has newly sloughed its skin. When the birds turn and whirl round, we see them twisted like the Great Bear itself."

Primarily a dramatist rather than a poet, Bhasa always takes care to see that such descriptive passages are always brief and above all dramatically congruous. If *Avi Maraka* exclaims, "what a wonderful thing the world is!" and goes into raptures over the beauty of the day-fall, it is because he has received an invitation from his beloved for a <sup>(tryst)</sup> tryst. Later, when forced to leave the palace and his beloved, <sup>(the heat of the summer noon)</sup> the heat of the summer noon is felt to be unbearable. "Ah, now the sun has, with its manifold rays, begun to corrode pitilessly the man whose heart is already burnt



by love. How terrible is this heat! The earth is blazing hot, as if in high fever, all its moisture being sucked dry by the rays of the sun. The trees, as if harbouring forest fires, have been deprived of their shade, and seem to be afflicted with consumption. The mountains, with their empty caverns, gape and cry helplessly for water. The whole earth, rendered unconscious by the burning heat, falls into a swoon. Hot winds cover everything with burning sand. The trees are spitting out discoloured leaves, like consumptives. Baked by the heat, the earth is cracking everywhere. My beloved, respond to my heart-cry!" When at last he is reunited with his beloved, the excited young man goes into raptures over the sky, now filled with monsoon clouds. "Look at those dark blue clouds whirling like dancers to the drum-beats of thunder! They are the kine of Indra, the god of rain, curtains for the hosts of stars, ant-hill homes of those snakes, the lightning flashes; dark bushes along the celestial highway, alms-gatherers from the sea, water-jars to bathe the mountains, shutters for the sun and the moon, cisterns of heaven's shower bath, hones for lover's arrows." Infected by this excitement, the girl gives the whispered reply, "Yes, they are beautiful now. They were not so before."

In *Pratima Nataka*, the sensitiveness to nature reaches a far more deep and tender resonance. The scene of Sita tending the plants in their retreat in Janasthana, before Ravana carried her off to years of loneliness, is very moving. Rama comes in search of Sita and, seeing that the plants have been newly watered, understands that she must be somewhere near. The observation is minute. Rama says to himself, "The water is swirling still with its bubbles. The thirsty birds that have alighted to drink it have not yet begun to do so, as it is still muddy. The beetles whose burrows are flooded by the water are crawling out to dry ground. The trees appear to have new girdles of wet rings where the water sinks at their roots. Ah, here is Sita. She, who used to be wearied by carrying a mirror in her hand before, feels no fatigue now in carrying a water-pot." After years of travail, they revisit the scene. It has not changed much during all these years. An aged tortoise, which had seen Sita before her captivity, gazes at her just as before. But the visitors now carry a poignant burden of memories. Rama asks Sita: "Do you remember these trees you planted when we were here before?" She replies: "Yes. But



then I could see every leaf when I stood up. Now I have to look up to see them." Rama muses, "That is the way of the world and represents the ups and downs brought about by time. Do you recollect the herd of deer startled on seeing Bharata and the great tortoise that witnessed our daily worship? Do you remember our sitting here and talking about our offering to my beloved father's shades, when we saw the golden deer?" The mention of the golden deer sends a cold wind sweeping through the corridors of remembrance. Sita trembles from head to foot. "Pray, do not speak about it." When Rama reassures her that she is safe now, she whispers to herself, "It all seems too good to be true." The tension now relaxes. The women of the hermitage fuss over Sita, calling her "Sita," "daughter," "darling," according to their age and one of them, on seeing Rama, tells her, "There is your husband. Go up to him. I cannot bear to see you alone." This little touch is supreme in its dramatic quality, for it refers back by mere suggestion to the years when Sita was tragically alone.

✓ Bhasa uses a terse style to preserve the rapidity and directness of the dramatic action. But its packed density is brilliant in its evocative power. The speed of a chariot is thus described in *Pra-tima Nataka*: "Trees appear to race towards it, so swiftly is their distance reduced by its motion. The ground runs down into the hollow between the wheels, like a turbulent torrent. The spokes cannot be seen because of the speed and the wheels appear as solid circles. The dust raised can never float to the front and is always left behind by the racing steeds." In the same play we get this intense miniature. "My father's feet were wet with the tears I let fall on them, and my head was wet with the tears he shed over me." ✓ Pithy epigrams are scattered throughout the plays. "Everything suits a handsome figure . . . Misfortunes never come singly . . . Good news sounds more pleasant from a friend's mouth . . . Death cannot be stayed when the hour has struck, and the pitcher must fall down when the rope breaks. The same law is at work with men and trees. They grow and are cut ✓ down by time." But they are all dramatically relevant and spoken by appropriate characters. Here is a harassed minister in *Avi Maraka* who grumbles: "If things go well, the people attribute it to the king. If they go ill, they blame it on the ministers."



The dialogues are spirited and racy. The *Madhyama Vyayoga* is a boisterous comedy where Ghatotkacha spoils for a fight with Bhima without realising that Bhima is really his father. "Don't you know who I am?" thunders the youngster. "I know. You are my son," says Bhima. The youngster gets terribly angry. Bhima pacifies him. "Forgive me. Warriors call spirited youths like you sons, meaning no offence." Though good-natured, Ghatotkacha was the son of Hidimbi, a demoness. We see him again in *Dutta Ghatotkacha* when he goes on a futile truce mission to Duryodhana. Appalled at the intransigence of the Kurus, he thunders at them: "You are much worse than demons. Demons do not try to burn their brothers asleep in a holiday retreat. Demons do not molest their brothers' wives. Demons do not celebrate the slaughter of a child in the battle-field (This refers to the death of Abhimanyu). The forms of demons may be strange, their manners fierce, but their hearts are not devoid of pity, like yours." But Bhasa is too great a dramatist to identify himself completely with any character in a dramatic situation and in the hot exchanges between Duryodhana and Krishna in *Duta Vakya*, the former ably holds his ground. When Krishna pleads for the rights of inheritance of the Pandavas, Duryodhana retorts: "What inheritance? Pandu left all desire for conjugal relations owing to the sage's curse. How can these fellows, who are the sons of others, claim a share?" Krishna pleads with him to take pity on his kinsmen. "What pity had you for your uncle Kamsa?" asks Duryodhana. "That was not my fault. He imprisoned my parents and killed their babes. He kept in jail his own father. So he was slain by death himself." "By death, say you? Rather say, by trickery. When Jarasandha, angered at the killing of Kamsa, his son-in-law, came to attack you, you fled, sick with fear. Where was your bravery then?" For once, the astute Krishna is tongue-tied and can only reply: "Duryodhana, the bravery of the wise is suited to the time, place and circumstances."

In structuring the plot and working out the dialogues, Bhasa always visualised how effective they would be on the stage. A very effective dramatic device he uses is to juxtapose the announcement made by a new arrival on the scene and the dialogue of the characters already present on the stage in such a way that the former becomes a dramatic answer or comment on the latter,



though apparently unintentional. In *Pratijna Yaugandharayana*, Vatsa Raja (Udayana) is defeated and captured by Maha Sena, later becomes an instructor in Vina (lute) to Maha Sena's daughter Vasavadatta and ultimately wins her as his bride. In an early sequence, Maha Sena and his queen are discussing who among the princes, who have applied for Vasavadatta's hand, is to be chosen, when the chamberlain comes in and says "Vatsa Raja." The prophetic intimation is that Vatsa Raja is the person to be chosen, though what the chamberlain has to say in fact is "Vatsa Raja has been captured." Likewise, in *Abhisheka Nataka*, Ravana tries to drive Sita to despair by telling her that Rama has been killed by his son, Indrajit. "By whom will you now be set free?", he taunts her. "By Rama," says a soldier who enters the stage just then, though what he has to announce is, "By Rama, Indrajit has been slain." It should be noted that the plot also moves forward in such dramatic interruptions. Another instance of dramatic irony is seen in *Duta Ghatotkacha*. When the news of Abhimanyu's death reaches the Kurus, Dussala, the sister of Duryodhana, is moved by pity for the boy though he was fighting against them and says that the man who inflicted widowhood on Uttara (Abhimanyu's wife) had thereby ordained widowhood for his own wife. Immediately after she learns from the soldier that it was her husband, Jayadratha, who killed Abhimanyu.

Humour, lusty or gentle as character and situation demand, enlivens these plays. The prologue of *Charudatta* opens on a note of pure fun. When the stage-director's wife tells him that she intends to prepare sweets with *ghee*, milk, sugar and fine rice, his mouth waters but he enquires where these condiments are. She replies: "In the market, at present." She adds that just now she is observing a fast. The director enquires the purpose. "To get a handsome husband." The worried man urgently needs a clarification. "In your next birth, I presume?" "Yes." The relieved man says: "That is perfectly all right." In *Pratijna Yaugandharayana* we come across an elephant-driver whose thirst is so irrepressible that he pawns the elephant. In *Pratima Nataka* an orderly has to beat up a lazy sweeper who cries out that it is a pity that he has not got a thousand arms like the legendary Kartavirya. "What will you do if you had a thousand arms?", asks the orderly. "I will kill you," says the sweeper. We come



across frolicsome young girls. In the *Pratima Nataka*, a young palace maid begs a sprig of the Asoka tree from the mistress of the green room. But it is required for the stage and the girl is asked to go and find it elsewhere. She takes her revenge by pinching the costumes. In the same play, Nandilika, the maid, is asked to make everything ready for the reception of the guests, Rama, Sita and Vibhishana. Since she knows that Vibhishana is Ravana's brother, the poor girl is in difficulties. "But Vibhishana is a demon eating men as food. How am I to arrange for his meals?" The Vidushaka in *Avi Maraka* is a priceless character. ✓ He is a Brahmin, but has not yet learned to read. When the maid Chandrika asks him to read the monogram on her ring, he excuses himself. "That word is not in my book, dear girl. With my sacred thread I am a Brahmin. Without it, and in rags, I am a hermit. If I take all my clothes off, I become a Jain monk." The maid Nalinika is astonished to see him in the women's apartments and, pointing to him, asks: "Who is this man?" He retorts: "How discerning! Nobody else took me for a man. They thought I was an old woman." He chases Chandrika but is too fat to catch up with her. "My feet stick to the same spot like those of a man pursued by an elephant in a dream." He has genuine affection for his excitable young friend Avi Maraka, but pleads his inability to be demonstrative. "What! Are you beginning to cry? I shall cry too. But not a single tear comes out of my eye. When my father died I tried mighty hard to weep; but, not a tear. So what chance now, for somebody else's troubles?" In the same play, the heroine is about to hang herself with her robe when she hears a clap of thunder and cries out: "Oh, save me, save me!" Very amusing is the conclusion of this play. The plebeian Avi Maraka turns out to be really a prince. The story is involved and, listening to it, King Kuntibhoja gets utterly confused. When he is finally assured that Avi Maraka is really the son-in-law of Kuntibhoja, the dazed king asks who that worthy may be, to be reminded politely that he himself is Kuntibhoja, father of Kurangi who has been wooed and won by Avi Maraka. Bhasa here seems to be laughing at dramatists, including himself, who sometimes have to use involved plots based on concealed identities.

Superb in characterization, Bhasa has presented before us an



astonishing variety of personalities. It is impossible not to love Karna who knows that the ascetic who has come to beg from him his protective armour is really Indra, the father of his rival, Arjuna. Nevertheless he gives them away. He is told that he has been cheated. He replies: "Not at all. It is I who have cheated Indra. Thousands of Brahmins propitiate him with innumerable sacrifices and beg favours of him. But he has had to beg a favour from me today." Yaugandharayana is another remarkable character who is determined to restore the ruined fortunes of his master Vatsa Raja and achieves his purpose with implacable resolve and brilliant stratagems. Even the minor characters are sculptured in the full round with unforgettable personal traits.

Bhasa's profound insight into human nature enables him to realise the most exquisite tenderness without a touch of sentimentality. About the torment of love, we overhear the heroine in *Avi Maraka* speaking to herself. "This is a disease I have never had before. The more I think of it the more childish I become. I care nothing for flowers, or food, or lively talk now. It is terrible—and yet, delightful." In *Bala Charita*, Devaki wants to have a long, long look at her new-born babe before he is taken away to safety. In *Pratima Nataka*, when the chariot which took Rama, Lakshmana and Sita to the border for starting their life of exile returns empty, Dasaratha says: "If the chariot has come back empty, without those three darlings, it is clear that Death has sent its chariot to fetch Dasaratha." But the finest sequences are in the second play on the Udayana story. In the first play, *Pratijna Yaugandharayana*, Udayana is defeated by Maha Sena and taken prisoner. But Udayana's minister, Yaugandharayana, manages affairs in such a masterly fashion that Udayana wins Maha Sena's daughter Vasavadatta as his bride. In the second play, *Svapna Vasavadatta*, the action of which is supposed to take place some years later, Udayana is again in difficulties. He is driven out by an usurper. Only a powerful alliance can restore him to the throne. Yaugandharayana convinces Vasavadatta that in the interests of the state, Udayana has to marry Padmavati, daughter of King Darsaka, who would prove a powerful ally. A palace fire is arranged and Udayana is made to believe that Vasavadatta perished in the flames. Udayana consents to the new alliance,



but he can never forget Vasavadatta. "She grieved when I grieved, rejoiced when I rejoiced. She was jubilant when I was praised, sad when blamed. When I suffered anguish of heart, though unvoiced, I found her grieving for the pang unnamed. When I was angry, she spoke sweet, soothing words. She was to me a wife, a friend, a minister great and all observant." After many adventures, Vasavadatta becomes a maid of honour to the same Padmavati who is now to be Udayana's queen. She has to weave the garland for the new queen's marriage on the score of her skill in this art. Bhasa handles this situation with extreme delicacy. A lesser dramatist may have been tempted to paint Padmavati in harsh colours. But she emerges as a lovable young girl who does not suspect the tension building up around her. Vasavadatta asks her: "Do you love your husband very much, my dear?" With the tender shyness of a newly wedded young girl she replies, "I do not know, friend, but when he is not by my side I feel ever so lonely." In the earlier play, Udayana, made captive by Maha Sena, had later been made instructor in Vina to Vasavadatta and the pupil had become the beloved. Padmavati tells Vasavadatta that she had gently suggested to her lord that she too would like to be taught how to play the Vina. But Udayana had simply heaved a sigh and remained silent. "What do you gather from that?" asks Vasavadatta. Padmavati replies: "He can never forget the noble Vasavadatta and her virtues. Only out of consideration for me did he restrain his tears in my presence."

Bhasa now prepares for the scene which must have been his most brilliant success on the stage. By a misunderstanding Vasavadatta comes to a room where she thinks Padmavati is resting. She sits on the bed. But it is occupied by Udayana and not Padmavati. Udayana in his troubled slumber cries out, "Oh Vasavadatta! Vasavadatta!" She rises abruptly from the bed, realising the mistake. For one moment she is in a panic. If her lord has seen her, the whole truth will be out, Udayana may repudiate the new alliance and his father-in-law will withdraw the promised help for driving out the usurper. But she realises that Udayana is crying out in his sleep. She lingers, for winning a brief solace for her long-tormented heart. Probably Udayana is half awake now and actually sees Vasavadatta though he experiences the vision as the continuation of his dream. He cries out, "Darling!



Beloved pupil! Respond to my call." Vasavadatta gives the low-toned response: "I am responding, my lord, I am responding." Udayana asks, "Are you angry?" She replies: "No, my lord, only sad and unhappy." Udayana asks, "If you are not angry with me, why have you laid aside your ornaments?" Produced well, this scene must have been one of the most brilliant highlights of fourth century drama.

We now come to *Uru Bhanga*, one of the most remarkable plays in the whole of the Indian tradition. Western criticism, and Indian evaluation following it, have stressed that the Indian dramatic tradition does not have a genuine tragedy, and can at best offer only romantic comedy where, even if there are some tragic vicissitudes, all ends happily. It has further been suggested that the tragic was taboo because the conservative mind felt that the impact of the presentation of suffering would lead to loss of faith in providence. Now, this argument does not seem at all tenable on further reflection. The doctrine of Karma is a doctrine of responsibility. It has been built into the Indian mentality over nearly two millennia. With that background, there was not the slightest question of a kindly providence appearing to be less kindly with the presentation of the tragic in drama or Kavya, for nowhere in the world would it have been more readily accepted than in India that the roots of punishment lie in one's own actions. Some other reason, therefore, has to be sought for the absence of tragedy in the Indian dramatic scene. Probably, the close association of drama with courtly circles whose sheltered living may have found tragic tensions beyond a certain degree of strength unbearable, may be an explanation. However, the assumption that Indian drama cannot present even one instance of a genuine tragedy is not correct. The greatest originality of Bhasa lies in the fact that he has given us *Uru Bhanga*, a genuine tragedy, and the only one in the Indian tradition.

Criticism which insists on the total absence of tragedy in Indian dramas has taken care to point out that the death or killing of important characters cannot make a play a genuine tragedy. The derivation of drama from legends of epic heroism is recalled and it is stressed that the killing of villains like Kamsa, as in the early plays Patanjali mentions, and as in Bhasa's own *Bala Charita*, has no relevance to the tragic temper and mood. This criticism



is just. But how villainous is the villain can be understood only by a close study of the way the dramatist builds up the character. The popular mind reduces the finely modelled characters of the epic histories, which are the sources of the great majority of the classical plays into contrasted types, black against white. Duryodhana is a bad character; *Uru Bhanga* deals with the death of Duryodhana; the play is a comedy, a pleasant affair where a bad character is disposed of; so runs the stereotyped assessment. It is surprising to see that even Keith has fallen into this trap and has not been able to recognise the remarkable originality of the play. "The *Uru Bhanga's* conclusion is happy, not tragic, for the worshipper of Krishna. . . .<sup>32</sup> In the *Uru-Bhanga*, Duryodhana's hauteur to the highest of gods meets with its just punishment; Duryodhana is the chief subject, but not the hero, of the piece which manifests the just punishment of the impious.<sup>33</sup> . . . It is a mere reading of modern sentiment into ancient literature to treat Duryodhana as the hero of the drama. . . .<sup>34</sup> The *Uru Bhanga* to us may be tragic, but that is because we are not adorers of Vishnu who regard with relish the fate of the enemy of that god, the evil Duryodhana. . . ."<sup>35</sup> The present writer gets the impression that Keith has not only not read the *Uru Bhanga* carefully, but has also failed to understand the *Maha Bharata*. For, in that great epic, there are no black and white contrasts, no simplicism of folklore which sees the Kurus as plain rascals, the Pandavas as paragons of virtue and Krishna as a Jehovah-like god. If the fate of Duryodhana is to be interpreted as the merited punishment of an impious villain, how is it that the *Maha Bharata* depicts him as leaving the world with his pride undiminished, assured of the heaven of heroes who fall in the field, expressing contempt for both the Pandavas and Krishna? I fear that Keith too, has fallen a prey to the amusing Western predilection for attempting an "analysis in depth" of the Indian mind and coming up with the finding that its extreme devotion ruled out sculpturesque modelling of characters, painting in *chiaroscuro*. Look at the amusing complications that would result if we returned the courtesy and claimed that old man Lear proved such a nuisance that it was a jolly good thing that he died and that this death exemplifies the implacable but unquestionable justice of Jehovah, the terrible father-image which Judaeo-Christian Europe could never exorcise. But before

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his death, this foolish, senile old man matured rapidly under the pressure of repeated tragic blows and realised that "ripeness was all." It is in such moments that the real depths of the tragic are sounded. For we suddenly realise that there were fine possibilities in the character which self-introspection, if it had been undertaken sufficiently early, might have nursed to strength. Freedom and initiative are real, because Lear does rise above his tragedy even at the hour of death to an understanding of all that has happened. Why did not that insight emerge earlier? This is the dark mystery in human life and in the deep shadow beyond the rim of the little circle of light that illumines present decision and action, throng fearful shadows, of destiny, of the Parcae, those women older than time who endlessly weave the light and dark threads of men's life in the loom of fate, of the Erinyes who haunted the wrongdoer and drove him into insanity.

Let us now study the *Uru Bhanga* carefully. Mortally wounded in the duel with Bhima, Duryodhana lies dying. This itself is a bold departure from tradition, because Sanskrit drama, unlike Elizabethan drama, avoided the forthright presentation of death scenes on the stage. To heighten the pathos, to bring out the softer traits in Duryodhana's character which stereotyped assessment of this play has completely ignored, Bhasa brings his little son Durjaya on the scene. This sequence is Bhasa's own invention, not to be found in the epic. The child tries to climb on to his lap. But the thigh has been smashed by Bhima's mace. Duryodhana prevents him and breaks down in grief. "Oh, Durjaya! Alas! This crescent moon, delight of my eyes and my heart's solace, by changed circumstance becomes a burning fire." Durjaya asks, "Why can't I sit in your lap, father?" Duryodhana says: "Your customary seat has gone, Durjaya. I too am going." "Where are you going, father?" "To join my hundred brothers." "Take me also with you." "Go, my son, and talk to Bhima." "Come father, they are looking for you." "Who?" "Grandfather and grandmother and all the ladies." "Go my son, I cannot come." "I will take you." "You are too young, my son."

The grandparents Durjaya mentioned were blind Dhritarashtra and Gandhari. In the epic they were miles away, at Hastinapura, at the time of Duryodhana's death. But Bhasa brings them to the battle-field for further building up the tragic tension. "Today,"



laments the old king, "when I heard of my son struck down, my blind face was made still blinder by tears." He calls out: "Eldest of five score brothers, answer me! Come, my son, come and greet me." "Here I come," says Duryadhana and tries to rise, but falls again because of the smashed thigh. "Alas, this is the greater blow. When Bhima hurled his mace at me, he did not deprive me of my limbs alone, but also of the power to go to my father and offer salutations to his feet." His mother, Gandhari, draws near. Duryodhana tells her: "I would ask a favour from you." "Speak out, my son." "With folded hands I ask, mother, if I have earned any merit, be thou my mother in my next birth too." The heroic mother, at last reconciled to her wayward son, replies, "It is my own wish you have expressed."

In the epic, Duryodhana goes to his death, proud and unrepentant. Here he muses over all that has happened and is less proud, more mature. The code of duels with the mace absolutely prohibits hits below the waist. And yet Bhima, finding no other way to vanquish his enemy, had smashed Duryodhana's thigh. Duryodhana had always been the favourite of Baladeva, elder brother of Krishna. That turbulent warrior, terrible in his anger, now storms into the scene, swearing to wreak vengeance on Bhima and all the Pandavas. But a rare transformation has come over Duryodhana, who pleads, "Be merciful. My head falls at thy feet, myself fallen on the earth. An end has come to our hostility, to the reason of the war, to ourselves." Baladeva protests: "He tricked you before my eyes." "You think I was tricked?" "No doubt of it." But Duryodhana's mind has gone back to the old days, to his own treacheries, his attempt to burn all the Pandava brothers with their mother in the holiday retreat. He feels he has no moral right to protest against Bhima's foul play. "My life it seems is the price I pay." Baladeva gets an intuition of the change that has come over Duryodhana. "Ah, hostility has given place to remorse." Where is the motif of impiety towards Krishna, which Keith makes much of, in this sequence?

But Baladeva now hears an uproar behind stage. "All is still, with never a roll of the battle drums; arrows and mail are cast aside with the *chowries* and umbrellas of state. Charioteers and warriors lie dead. Who is this then, twanging his bow and filling the sky with flocks of frightened crows?" It is Asvathama, the



son of Drona, commander-in-chief of the Kuru hosts. The Pandavas had spread the rumour that Asvathama had been killed, thus robbing the old man of the will to live. Asvathama is determined to avenge the slaying of his father. He sees Duryodhana. "Here he lies on the stony seat of his last home and sinks like the westering sun plunging into the twilight." He contemplates the fallen hero and says, "It is manifest the hero Duryodhana was defeated by cruel destiny." Going up to him, he asks: "O King of the Kurus, what state is this?" Duryodhana replies, "The result of insatiable ambition." Asvathama expresses his intention to repay treachery with treachery and to kill Krishna and the Pandavas, wipe them all out from the surface of the earth, like a bad picture from a good canvas. But Duryodhana says: "Say not so. The whole host of kings now lies in the lap of mother earth. Karna has gone to heaven. Bhishma has fallen. My five score brethren are slain and I am brought to this plight. Why any more fight? Unstring thy bow." Asvathama hotly replies: "When Bhima wielded his mace today, he broke your spirit and not only your thigh." Duryodhana gives the quiet reply: "It is not the mace, but the recollection of the dishonouring of Draupadi, the slaying of Abhimanyu and of making the Pandavas wander in the forest by trickery in the dice game that has unnerved me."

\* It should be very clear now that the *Uru Bhanga* cannot be dismissed as the staged version of an old story about a hero finishing off a villain. In the last few moments before death, Duryodhana grows immeasurably in moral stature and realises that ripeness is all. But the supreme psychological insight of the dramatist is yet to follow. Earlier, reconciled with his fate, realising it as the bitter fruit of his own deeds, he had exhorted his little son, Durjaya. "You must obey the Pandavas like myself and follow the bidding of lady mother Kunti. Draupadi you must honour like your own mother." He had dissuaded Baladeva from vengeance. He had also made a similar appeal to Asvathama. But the latter is not prepared to forgive the slaying of his father by trickery, even if Duryodhana is prepared to forgive his own death by foul play. "By your Highness and by my own soul I swear and by the heaven of the brave, I will make a raid by night and destroy the Pandavas." Asvathama proceeds to declare Durjaya as heir to the kingdom. Duryodhana, whose last moment has come, de-



parts with these words: "My heart's desire is now fulfilled. My life is slipping away. Here are my revered ancestors, Santanu and the others. There rise my hundred brothers with Karna at their head to greet me."

Now, this conclusion could not have been a casual one. It must be accepted as a deliberate one, for Bhasa here makes a radical deviation from the epic account which is his source. In the epic, Duryodhana dies after the night raid and not before, and the nomination of Durjaya as the heir by Asvathama is an absolutely new invention. Changes so radical could not have been purposeless. What could have been Bhasa's dramatic purpose here? The conclusion is a very intriguing change, not only from the epic source, but also from the earlier mood of Duryodhana who had exhorted Durjaya to be loyal to the Pandavas. I venture to offer this explanation. Tragedy can shock, and probably it alone can shock, the soul into objective self-assessment and perception of the implacable, but not unjust, moral scheme of life's vicissitudes. But the new perceptions need time and favourable contexts to be nursed to strength so that they can dissolve the self-centered habits and outlook of years and alter the whole tenor of life. We glimpse here the profounder tragedy, that the chastened perception was denied the time and opportunity to grow into strength and affect a radical transformation of character. The outer and inner storm that pierced the dark, self-centered mind of Lear with the gleams of a new light, also shattered his life so that even when he realised that ripeness was all, he was denied the days that could have allowed the new perception to rule a transformed tenor of life. That the new perception stimulated by tragic experience is as precariously unstable, without the help of time which alone can build it to strength, as it is precious, is brought out even more forcibly in the case of Duryodhana. In the epic, the war drums had been hushed. Here, Asvathama's decision indicates the prolongation of the war. The outlook and habits of an entire life time are stimulated to a resurgence by this fresh possibility and they overwhelm the new values so briefly glimpsed. Here the Sanskrit tradition makes amends for its exclusion of tragedy by giving us a unique play which reveals a deeper tragic insight than probably any play from traditions which have great tragic dramas to show. The hidden nobility of Duryo-



dhana has been brought out and the profoundest tragedy is that death cut him off before his new, finer perceptions could wage a successful war with the hardened habits and outlook of years.

There is yet another profundity here. Drama cannot present life-views in the abstract. It should do it only through characters who embody those life-views. And the episodic continuity of the dramatic action should originate directly from the interaction of these characters. The dramatist also cannot take sides, but must understand the logic of the behaviour of each character in terms of his temperament, his motivations, the provocations he has suffered. This means that the drama, which seeks a profound understanding of life, cannot afford to round off its action too neatly or point a moral too smugly. The *Uru Bhanga* comes to a conclusion almost immediately after Duryodhana's last words. But in a few words Bhasa has managed to present divergent life-views, to indicate their logic in terms of specific temperaments and experiences. Duryodhana had gone to his death after the battle in the field had prolonged as a new battle deep within, between new values and old habits, but without getting the time for a definitive conclusion. Dhritarashtra says: "I will depart for the penance groves so full of pious folk, far away from a realm made valueless by the loss of my sons." This decision is consistent with his character and the changed circumstances. Earlier, when Baladeva saw the king arriving on the field, he had said: "He is a mine of fortitude, the sight of his eyes distributed among hundred sons." But the hundred had departed and with them departed the joy in living. Asvathama says: "Now I depart, my bowman's hand uplifted for the slaughter of the sleepers." Besides indicating that the world's action floods past the confines of the plot selected for the drama, it also provides the logic of it. For the Pandavas, however genuine their basic claims, had used treachery, against Drona and against Duryodhana. This provokes consequences that trail out beyond the range of the selective perspective of the play. Asvathama is not old and world-weary like Dhritarashtra to withdraw from the world. His past is not branded with guilt like Duryodhana's, so that we cannot expect him to accept the death of his father as deserved retribution for evil. He is angered by the treachery. The Furies are not yet appeased. If Duryodhana is punished for his guilt, the Pandavas will also have to pay



dearly in the night raid for stooping to choose wrong means, however just their ends might have been.

Kalidasa achieved supreme perfection in poetic drama. But considering the variety of output and the infallible judgment regarding what would be effective on the stage, Bhasa cannot be denied his position as the greatest dramatist in the Indian tradition. The *Uru Bhanga* alone is enough to establish his unique originality. In *Pratijna Yaugandharayana*, he anticipates Visakhadatta's brilliant play of intrigue which has Chanakya (Kautilya) as the hero. The reminiscential scenes in *Pratima Nataka* foreshadow Bhavabhuti's *Uttara Rama Charita*. The Vasavadatta story is echoed in the plays of Harsha and Kalidasa, though altered in form. In minor details, the indebtedness of later dramatists is considerable. Thus, the scene in *Avi Maraka* between the heroine and her friends Nalinika and Magadhika is imitated in the scene between Shakuntala, Anasuya and Priyamvada. The hermitage scene in *Svapna Vasavadatta* is the model of the hermitage scene in *Shakuntala*. Kalidasa has accepted Bhasa's order of genealogy for Dasaratha, given in the *Pratima Nataka*, for his *Raghu Vamsa*.

The date and authorship of the *Mrichha Katika*<sup>36</sup> (Clay Cart) have been the subject of a heated controversy in which have participated, among others, Konow, Mehendale,<sup>37</sup> Jolly,<sup>38</sup> Jacobi<sup>39</sup> and Basak.<sup>40</sup> The prologue of the play refers to King Sudraka as the author. A legendary king of the name is referred to in later literature and some scholars think that the playwright remained anonymous and attributed the work to the king to gain prestige for the work. The play is expanded from the fragments of Bhasa's *Charudatta*. Only one writer<sup>41</sup> has suggested that *Charudatta* is derived from *Mrichha Katika*. The majority of critics are of the opinion that the indebtedness runs the other way. But the *Mrichha Katika* is in ten acts while the *Charudatta* fragment consists only of four acts and the reshaping is brilliant enough to merit evaluation as an original.

The hero of the play is Charudatta, a large-hearted youngman, Brahmin by birth and merchant by profession. He is a perfect man of the world, who loves literature, music and art, does not disdain gambling, nor share his friend Maitreya's bias against hetaerae. His generosity has landed him in poverty, but he is not



embittered. The villain is Samsthanaka, the brother-in-law of the ruler of Ujjaini. He has been paying his unwelcome attention to Vasantasena, a cultured, pretty hetaera of the city. "With love my poor heart is burnt to a cinder, like a piece of meat upon the blazing coals . . . . One day you will tumble into my hands like Sita fell into those of Ravana (!)" When the play opens he and another spiv are chasing Vasantasena in a street near Charudatta's house. The frightened girl calls to her maids who were escorting her and Samsthanaka is alarmed till the spiv tells him that the hetaera's attendants are girls and not men. Samsthanaka is relieved and boasts, "I am a match for a hundred of them." Vasantasena takes refuge in a house which happens to be Charudatta's. His maid who happens to come out into the street just then is grabbed by Samsthanaka who thinks it is Vasantasena. Inside, in the dark, Charudatta mistakes Vasantasena for the maid, and tells her: "Rohasena (Charudatta's little son) must have enjoyed the breeze long enough. He must be chilled by the evening dew. Bring him in and wrap him in this shawl." Vasantasena takes the shawl. "Scented with jasmine flowers! Ah, he is not all a philosopher." When the light arrives, the mistake is cleared and Charudatta chases Samsthanaka away, scorning the latter's threat of vengeance. Sudraka's attention to minor characters comes out here. While Samsthanaka abuses Charudatta, his friend, though a spiv, respects him. "He has become impoverished by his liberality, like the lake in summer which is exhausted by relieving the thirst of the travellers." Vasantasena asks Charudatta to keep a casket of jewels in safe custody for her. She says that the rowdies were after it. This obviously is not the truth, but the girl wants an excuse for revisiting her rescuer.

The next act is a comic interlude. A gambler, running away from two other gamblers to whom he has lost heavily, takes refuge in a ruined temple. He walks backward, to avoid foot prints leading in, and since the shrine has no idol, seeks to elude notice by sitting still like an idol. His pursuers pinch him to see if he is really an idol, but he does not move. They abandon their search and console themselves with a game of dice at the foot of the "idol". The game becomes so exciting that the "idol", unable to control himself, leaps off his pedestal and begs to be allowed to participate. He is thrashed and takes to his heels again. He



runs into Vasantasena who recognizes in him a former servant of Charudatta and saves him by paying off his pursuers.

In the next act we come across Sharvilaka, an educated man turned burglar. He has done advanced research in house-breaking and has a different name for each type of tunnel that the house-breaker adopts for getting into homes. He burgles the jewels left by Vasantasena in Charudatta's house. Charudatta's wife, though thrown into the shade by Vasantasena, is a noble woman and she decides to replace the lost jewels with her own sole remaining necklace. She tells her maid: "This necklace was given to me by my parents. It is all that is left to us and I know my husband, with his nobility of spirit, will not accept it from me. Girl, go call Maitreya here." Maitreya's visit to Vasantasena's palatial mansion provides occasion for humour. He sees Vasantasena's mother, a woman of generous proportions. "How did she contrive to get in here? Oh, I suppose she was first set up here, as they do with an unwieldy idol of Mahadeva, and then the walls were built round her." The burglar, Sharvilaka, is in love with Vasantasena's maid and offers the stolen jewel to her. Vasantasena comes to know the whole story. She forgives Sharvilaka and allows him to marry her maid. In the next act, Vasantasena goes to Charudatta's house to return his jewels. A storm begins to blow up, enabling a smooth transition to a poetic mood. "The stars disappear, like a favour bestowed on a worthless man. The quarters lose their radiance, like women severed from their beloved. Molten by the fierce fire of Indra's bolt, the sky is poured down in rain." Vasantasena complains in the best traditions of Sanskrit romantic poetry. "If the cloud must thunder, let him; cruel were men ever. But, O lightning, can it be that thou too dost not know the pangs of a maiden's love?" Charudatta similarly is stirred to tender thoughts. "Happy the life of those whose limbs embrace the limbs of their loved ones, come to their home, dripping wet and cold with the water of the clouds." Vasantasena manages to reach Charudatta's house. The storm obligingly increases its fury and compels her to spend the night there.

Vasantasena is now no longer a hetaera. She had heard about Charudatta, "the ornament of Ujjaini," long before and it was a case of genuine love at first sight when she met him on the day she took refuge in his house, fleeing from Samsthanakā. After



the night of storm, she can hardly believe that she, a hetaera, has been able to win the love of Charudatta and wonders whether all that has happened is really true or a dream. She is fascinated by the lovely face of Charudatta's little son and stretches out her arms in the great hunger for motherhood which has been denied to her. But the child in his innocence refuses to come to her, because she wears such fine things and ornaments of gold. In a spontaneous gesture of whimsicality and understanding, she takes off her jewels and places them in the child's toy clay-cart. The plot would hinge on this casual gesture as becomes clear later.

The opening of the next act shows Vasantasena leaving the house in the morning. By mistake she steps, not into the carriage which Charudatta had summoned for her, but into one which belongs to the villain, Samsthanaka. When Maitreya comes out to escort her, he opens by mistake the door of another carriage in which Aryaka, a political insurgent, has managed to escape from the prison. The fetters are still on his feet. Charudatta comes out, realises the mistake and enables Aryaka to escape. This thread is not in Bhasa's *Charudatta*. It has been criticised as intrusive and irrelevant, but it does serve to create the general atmosphere of the city where anything can happen, from burglary to revolution. Further, the political story is never allowed to grow into a competing sub-plot. Lastly, the victory of Aryaka is necessary for the final discomfiture of Samsthanaka, who was till then enjoying a free hand in his rascality, being the brother-in-law of the ruler, Palaka, who is finally driven out by Aryaka.

Vasantasena finds that her mistake has brought her to Samsthanaka's house, instead of her own. When he threatens to kill her for not submitting to his will and taunts her as the "inamorata of a beggarly Brahmin," she replies, "Delightful words! Pray, proceed, for you speak my praise." The infuriated Samsthanaka takes her by the throat and she faints with these words on her lips: "My homage to Charudatta!" The rake goes to the court and lodges against Charudatta a charge of murdering Vasantasena for her jewels. There is a terse, allegorical description of the seat of justice which has the power of Rouault's great painting of judges. "The prospect is little pleasing. The court looks like a sea. Its tossing waves are wrangling advocates. Its brood of monsters are these death's ministers. Attorneys skim like wily



snakes the surface. Spies are the shell-fish cowering amidst its weeds. Vile informers, like birds of prey, hover and then pounce upon their victims. The beach, that should be justice, is unsafe, rough, rude and broken by oppression's storms." During the trial, Maitreya, in a scuffle, scatters in the court the jewels with which Vasantasena had filled the toy cart, and which he was keeping to return to her. This is damaging circumstantial evidence and Charudatta is condemned to death. He does not mind the fate awaiting him, but he feels the dishonour. "I fear not death, but my honour sullied. Were that stain removed, death would be as dear as the birth of a son." Pathos and humour blend exquisitely in the next scene. Charudatta's little son asks the executioner to kill him and let his father go. The executioner relieves the tension by the tale of his father who had advised him on his death-bed not to be too quick about his job, on the off chance that there could always be some last minute development, a revolution or something, to save the condemned. This development now takes place. The gambler whom Vasantasena had saved from his debtors had later become a monk and he had seen Samsthanaka bury her. He exhumes and revives her. She now arrives on the scene and tells the story of Samsthanaka's assault. The cowardly moron now falls at Vasantasena's feet. "Gentle girl, have pity on me. I will never kill you again, never, never, never." He is pardoned and everybody is happy.

From the world of the legendary heroes of antiquity or of elegant nobility, in this play we step into the streets of a city like Ujjaini and rub shoulders with thieves, gamblers, political insurgents, mendicants, courtiers, idlers, police constables, housemaids and courtesans. Incidents range from housebreaking to murder and political revolution. The plot is neatly contrived, maintaining suspense to the last. The mood is a blend of sophistication and poetry. There are nearly thirty characters, even the minor ones sculptured in the full round. With its panorama of plebeian life and fine blending of realism and the romantic spirit, the play stands unique in the Sanskrit tradition.

### III. *Kalidasa*

Sudraka starts with realism, flavours it with poetry and achieves



the compact organisation of drama with the help of a well-knit plot. Kalidasa moves from poetry to drama. The transformation is not successful in *Vikramorvasiya*. The achievement is better in *Malavikagnimitra* and becomes supreme in *Shakuntala*.

In *Vikramorvasiya*,<sup>42</sup> the shadowy legend of the love of Pururavas and the nymph Urvasi in the Rig Veda is expanded into a full-fledged drama. The young dramatist cannot quite control the temptation for a sensational opening. The first scene is located in the air. The prologue is followed by the screams of the nymphs from whose midst their companion, Urvasi, has been torn away by a demon. The king rescues her. "As the night, freed from the darkness when the moon has appeared, as the light of a fire in the evening when the smoke has nearly all gone, so appears this lady fair, recovering from her faint, and winning back her composure, like the Ganges after her stream has been troubled by the falling of her banks." They fall desperately in love. In the next scene, a maid-servant of the queen extracts cleverly from the Vidushaka the secret of the change which has come over the king. In the garden scene that follows, the king confesses to the Vidushaka his love and is overheard by Urvasi, who stands near by, invisible. She writes a love letter on a birch leaf. Finally she reveals herself, but after a brief exchange of tender sentiments, she is recalled to play a part in heaven in a drama produced by Bharata. Her letter, unluckily, falls into the hands of the queen who refuses to be appeased by Pururavas's attempts to soothe her. In the next scene we learn from a conversation between two pupils of Bharata that the love-sick Urvasi, who was playing the role of Lakshmi, when asked whom she loved, replied "Pururavas" instead of "Purushothama" (Vishnu) and was thereupon exiled from heaven. She can live with her lover until he sees the child to be born of her; then she has to return. Days of happy union follow. In the fourth act, angry at Pururavas for some trivial cause, Urvasi enters a grove. But it is the grove of Kumara, forbidden to women, and she is turned into a creeper. Lamentations and search by the king follow. A voice from heaven tells him of a magic stone, armed with which he grasps the creeper which in his embrace turns back into Urvasi. In the next act, the magic stone is stolen by a vulture which, however, falls, pierced by the arrow of a youthful archer. The arrow bears the inscription:



"Arrow of Ayus, son of Urvasi and Pururavas." Shortly after, the king meets the boy. Urvasi had concealed the fact of his birth as she would have had to leave Pururavas if he had seen him. The tragic separation now seems inevitable. But Narada comes with good tidings. A battle is raging between the gods and demons. The help of Pururavas is necessary and in reward Urvasi will live with him all his life.

Urvasi here is not the *femme fatale* of the Rig Vedic fragments. The plot is weak, overloaded with fairy elements like Urvasi turning into a creeper and being re-transformed by a magic stone. In the fifth act, the opportunity is missed of a tragic conflict of emotion between the joy of Pururavas in finding his son and his sorrow at the loss of Urvasi resulting from the very sight of the child.<sup>43</sup> Kalidasa leans heavily on poetic passages. These are, of course, of exquisite beauty. There is a remarkable seizure of vernal beauty at the moment of transition "from the innocence of childhood to the prime of youth." We meet again the implacable summer, when the antelopes seek the shades of trees, the bees take refuge in the cool interior of Karnikara buds, and the water-birds escape from the unbearably heated lake-water to the lilies close to the shore. Magnificent is the description of the monsoon which the excited Pururavas interprets as a homage to himself. "Exquisitely brocaded with lightning, the cloud is my royal canopy. The Nicula trees wave their blossoms like *chowries*. The peacocks with their voices rendered mellower by the lapse of heat are my bards. And the mountains are the merchants who bring to me their homage of rain-torrents."<sup>44</sup>

Probably the poet, trying his hand at drama, may have unconsciously preferred the ballet or operatic form. This may explain how almost the whole of the fourth act has become a lyrical, but undramatic, sequence, showing the distracted king searching for Urvasi in the grove. He deems the cloud a demon who has stolen her away. He demands of the peacock, the cuckoo, the flamingo, the bee, the elephant, the boar, the antelope what has become of her. He searches the yielding soil softened by showers, which may have perchance, if she had passed that way, retained the delicate impression of her swaying gait, and may show some vestige of the red tincture of her dyed feet. He deems her transformed into the stream, whose waves are the movements of her



eyebrows, while the rows of birds on its surface are her girdle.

How was this scene presented on the stage? With only one character on the stage, the presentation could have been successful only on an operatic, and not dramatic, basis. Were the cloud, the elephant and the bee represented on the stage symbolically? Were the movements of the king, who had temporarily lost his reason, balletised? It is clear that Kalidasa, in this scene, leans heavily on the use of music to sustain the lyrical mood. It is full of Prakrit verses. Their authenticity has been doubted, because they are not found in the South Indian recension of the text and because, according to some scholars, the Apabhramsa of the type found in them is suspicious in a drama of such early date. But the North Indian recension calls the drama a Trotaka which is justified only on the basis that the verses were meant to be sung. The genuineness of the Apabhramsa has also been vigorously defended.<sup>45</sup> We can, therefore, accept them as genuine. They narrate the tale of an elephant-king madly in search of his mate and must have been meant to be sung behind the scenes. But the play, as a whole, cannot be said to have matured from the operatic to the dramatic level.

✓ Polygamous tradition makes the resolution of the eternal triangle a far less difficult problem in Indian drama than in European romantic comedy. But in Bhasa and, in a different way in Sudraka, ✓ such themes had conserved poignancies. In *Malavikagnimitra*,<sup>46</sup> which incidentally set the pattern for several later plays, deeper resonances are avoided and we come across the gallant lover whose only problem in making a fresh conquest is getting round the old love. As a matter of fact, the triangle becomes a parallelogram here, because Agnimitra has already two queens, Dharini, ✓ the senior and Iravati, the junior, when his appreciative eye falls on the picture of Malavika, one of Dharini's waiting maidens, a fugitive from a foreign land. He wants to meet her and the Vidushaka thinks up a stratagem. He provokes a quarrel between two rival masters of the dance, forces a competition between their pupils, one of whom happens to be Malavika. During the contest, Agnimitra manages to have a few words with her. Dharini understands the whole trick and makes the caustic comment that such efficiency would be of advantage if the king could show it in affairs of state. In the next scene, Malavika is sent by Dharini



for the delightful spring ceremony of olden days when pretty damsels touched Asoka trees with their feet to make them bloom in full glory. In the garden Agnimitra gets another opportunity for sentimental exchanges but is overheard by the younger queen, Iravati. The news gets to Dharini who has Malavika locked up. The Vidushaka comes to the rescue again. He declares himself bitten by a snake; the only remedy is the use of a gem in the queen's ring; the ring thus obtained is used to get Malavika released. The lovers meet again but the vigilant Iravati breaks up the union. The resolution is managed by the revelation that Malavika is really a Vidarbha princess, originally destined as the bride of Agnimitra. Dharini's son Vasumitra has inflicted a crushing defeat on the Greeks and the delighted queen does not mind another recruit to the harem. An elegant trifle, the play skims along lightly, avoiding poignancies, making a pleasant, but not enduring impression.

We leave these levels far below when we come to the *Abhijnana Shakuntala*.<sup>47</sup> It came to the notice of European scholarship very early and Goethe's great tribute has been quoted so often that it is with diffidence that it is repeated here:

"Wouldst thou the young year's blossoms, and the fruits of its decline,

And all by which the soul is charmed, enraptured, feasted, fed;

Wouldst thou the Earth and Heaven itself in one sole name combine,

I name thee, O Shakuntala! and all at once is said."

The story, very briefly, is this. King Dushyanta, a gallant like Agnimitra, out hunting in the woods, comes across Shakuntala in a hermitage and woos her. He returns to the capital, the girl to follow him eventually. The love-sick girl neglects the duties of hospitality in her absorption when a sage visits the hermitage and is visited with the curse that the king shall not remember her. Later, when he is calmed down, the sage concedes that the sight of the king's ring left with her will bring back memories to him. But on her way to the court, the ring slips from her finger into the river, the king in his amnesia rejects her, and Shakuntala re-



tires to the forest where Dushyanta's son is born to solace her loneliness. A fisherman finds the ring inside a fish and when the signet ring is brought to the king, memories flood back and overwhelm him with grief. A few years later, he is summoned by Indra to help in the war against demons and on his return, the aerial car alights near the spot where Shakuntala is residing. The play ends with the reunion. We may add that this summary is totally useless, without a closer look at the evolution of the play, for an appreciation of its profundities.

✓ The germ of the story is found in the Maha Bharata.<sup>48</sup> But ✓ the modifications introduced by Kalidasa are radical. The Padma Purana version approximates to Kalidasa's and Winternitz<sup>49</sup> and Sarma<sup>50</sup> have suggested that Kalidasa got his version from it. But the Purana is definitely later than Kalidasa and its version seems to be a recast of Kalidasa's story.<sup>51</sup> In the Maha Bharata, Shakuntala is a straightforward, but shrewd and taunting girl. There she herself narrates the story of her birth to the king and, later on, bargains with him before accepting his suit. Kalidasa, with his dramatic instinct, has made Anasuya, a friend of Shakuntala, narrate her story, while the idea of bargaining has been altogether dropped, to give us the exquisite picture of the working of love in the heart of a young, innocent maiden.<sup>52</sup> The sage's curse, the loss and subsequent recovery of the ring and the final reunion are all products of Kalidasa's genius.

The play opens with the picture of exultant manhood. King Dushyanta has come to the woods for a hunt and an antelope is fleeing before him. "His glance fixed on the chariot ever and anon, the deer leaps up, gracefully bending his neck. Through fear of the arrow's imminent impact, he draws ever the hinder part into the front of his body. He strews his path with the grass, half-chewed, which drops from his mouth gaping with fatigue. So much aloft he bounds that he flies in the air rather than runs on the earth." But the deer and the pursuing chariot have drawn near a hermitage where the chase is prohibited. The king hears the agitated voice of a hermit. "Do not practise violence on the deer of the hermitage," an exhortation which has symbolic resonance, for the sophisticated urbanite is now about to meet a beauty reared in the retreat.

The hunt is called off and the king and his retinue settle down



for a brief holiday as the guests of the hermits. Madhavya, the Vidushaka, is fed up with this life. "We have been roaming even at noon through endless expanses of forests, in the hot season where even the shade of trees cannot give us shelter. Our drink is the turbid flow of the mountain streams, bitter with the leaves shed by the trees. Our meals are at irregular intervals and are mostly meat roasted on spits. Even at night I cannot lie down comfortably because of the pain in my joints caused by galloping on horse-back. And I am awakened very early at dawn by these whore-sons, the bird-hunters in the 'surrounding forests.'" But the tranquillity and deep peace of the woodland retreat win over Dushyanta. "Paddy grains lie scattered under the trees, fallen from the hollows in their trunks which the parrots have made their nests. The rocks have become smooth and shiny, being used by the hermits to crush oil seeds. The antelopes have acquired confidence and listen to sounds of human activity without taking to flight. The paths leading from the river are marked with lines left by the water dripping from the bark-garments of hermits returning from their dip . . . . The roots of trees are nourished by the moisture wafted by the breeze from the ponds. The red colour of the tender sprouts of plants shine in contrast with the smoke from the sacrificial fire. The young deer move about leisurely and fearlessly in the neighbouring meadows where the Darbha grass, cut for the sacrificial fire, has once again put forth fresh shoots."

The king discovers a far more powerful attraction—Shakuntala, the foster-daughter of the sage Kanva. Her beauty is tender, fresh and unspoilt like the woodland creepers, she affectionately tends every day. Hidden behind a <sup>thicket</sup>, the king watches Shakuntala and her friends, Priyamvada and Anasuya, watering the plants. A startled bee creates a diversion by buzzing round the girl. The urbanite feels envious about the bee. "See, the daring bee touches the tremulous body of the girl with her startled glances, humming exultantly, whispering tender secrets into her ear; and even as she vainly tries to brush him aside, he drinks the nectar of her lips." Her friends, to whom Shakuntala appeals for help, taunt her by suggesting that the punishment of villains is the duty of the king and this is the cue for Dushyanta to dis-

*close himself.*



move away, Shakuntala casts a longing, lingering look behind, pausing under the pretext that a thorn has entered her foot.

The bond matures rapidly. The king marries the woodland maid. He is called back to the capital. Shakuntala, who is now an expectant mother, is to follow him later. Then occurs the unhappy incident of the visit of Durvasa and the curse. Oldenberg has severely criticised this incident as a weak device for managing the crisis of Dushyanta's rejection of Shakuntala. De has sought to defend it by claiming that, in introducing the motif of destiny, there is no inherent inferiority in an external device, as compared with the complication created by the inner impetus.<sup>53</sup> This defence is very weak. Tragedy which springs wholly from chance and external accident cannot be meaningful like the tragedy which springs from character. Tagore,<sup>54</sup> with his fine intuition, was able to reveal that such weak defences were really not necessary and that what looks like a clumsy device, relying on accident, does not obscure responsibility, or the tragic flaw in character. There is a scene, after the return of Dushyanta to the capital, so casually and lightly sketched that its dramatic significance has escaped every critic except Tagore. The king and Madhavya are in the garden. A melody floats to them. Madhavya guesses that Hamsapadika, Dushyanta's queen, is the singer. He listens intently to the song. "O honey bee, how is it that, greedy of fresh honey and having kissed the blossom of the mango, you have now forgotten her in the recent loving welcome by the lotus?" Madhavya asks Dushyanta whether he understands the meaning of the song. He replies that Hamsapadika is taunting him on account of his attentions to the other queen, Vasumati. This could be true because Hamsapadika knows nothing of the episode in the forest. But, for that very reason, this tear-stained song of a stricken heart in the royal harem reveals the casual manner in which Dushyanta wooed and forgot. The sage's curse is meant only to soften the verdict implied in the analysis of character. The amnesia had its seed in Dushyanta's temperament and when memories returned he had to purify himself by suffering, just as if his rejection of Shakuntala had been deliberate.

In the case of the girl also, the sage's curse is really not an external, intrusive act of destiny. It was her understandable, but all the same immature, self-absorption that made her forget the



world and her obligations towards it and made her neglect the duties of hospitality. The whole movement of the play, from now on, will be the transformation of her character under suffering. The sage Kanva, who was away from the hermitage during Dushyanta's visit, returns to hear of the developments with mingled joy and sorrow. He is very happy that his foster-daughter has found a good husband. "Just as yonder jasmine creeper leans for support upon the mango tree, so have you, my daughter, chosen the most proper of persons for your spouse." But the old man is also tormented by the thought of parting. "At the thought that Shakuntala will leave this very day, my heart is smitten with grief, my voice is choked with suppressed tears, my sight is dulled by anxious thought. If so great is the affliction through affection of even me, a forest-dweller, how much more are householders tormented at separation from their daughters!" The quiet retreat will no longer be the same without Shakuntala. "O trees and creepers! She who never drank a sip of water till she had watered you, who could never brook one little shoot or flower being culled from you, whose greatest joy was always at the season of your first blossoming, that Shakuntala is now leaving you to go to her husband's house. May you all give her farewell!" As she is about to leave, she finds that the creeper she had tended clings to her garment again and again. Kanva consoles her by saying that, when united with her husband, when she becomes a mother, the grief caused by separation will subside.

But a tragic shock was awaiting her at the end of the journey. Dushyanta is gravely courteous but his incredulity goes on increasing as the desperate girl tries to revive memory by recalling one tender episode after another. "Do you not remember in the jasmine-bower, one day, how you had poured the rain water that a lotus had collected in its cup into the hollow of your hand? . . . Just then my adopted child, the little fawn, with long, soft eyes, ran up, and you, before you quenched your own thirst, gave to the little creature, saying, 'drink you first, gentle fawn!' But she would not, from strange hands. And yet, immediately after, when I took some water in my hand, she drank, absolute in her trust. Then, with a smile, you said, 'Each creature has faith in its own kind. You are both children of the wood, and each confides in the other, knowing where its trust is!'"



But remembrance is not stirred. The hermits, who had escorted her from the hermitage, leave her. Her husband rejects her. She finds shelter in the hermitage of Maricha. But this retreat cannot be the same as the one where she grew up. She has lost her connection with her comrades, the birds, beasts and plants, the beauty, peace and innocence of her former life. Kanva's retreat too was a penance-grove. But the austerities were not meant for her, any more than they were meant for the woodland creeper that burst into the glory of flowers in spring, or the fawns that lived the lives of their natural impulses. But Maricha's hermitage becomes a real penance-grove. The girl is tragically alone. Kanva had blessed her that the birth of a son "whose birth purifies all," would reconcile her to the separation from the friends of her adolescence. It does more, for it has to reconcile her to the separation from the father of her child too. The girl who, in the first flood of love, had not even waited for Kanva's return to the hermitage to celebrate the nuptials, now becomes the mother, who has to wait for time to heal the tragic wounds.

When the fisherman brings his signet-ring, the dam of amnesia is burst and the flood of memories overwhelms Dushyanta and it is now his turn to be alone with tormenting thoughts. "When I rejected her she sought to regain her companions, but the disciple, in his master's stead, bade her stay; then she turned on cruel me a glance dimmed by her falling tears, and that now burns me like a poisoned arrow." He seeks solace by trying to paint the woodland retreat and her who was its dearest dweller. The landscape slowly emerges on the canvas: "the stream of Malini, on its sands the swan-pair resting; holy foot-hill lands of great Himalaya's sacred ranges; and under trees that bear hermits' bark-garments on their branches high, a doe that on the buck's horn rubs her itching eye lid." The form of his beloved emerges in luminous colour, leaning against the plant which she has just watered. Her face is hot and the flowers are dropping from her hair, for the braid is loosened. Her arms droop like weary creepers. She has loosened her girdle and she seems a little fatigued. The Siris-blossom, fastened over her ear, brushes her cheek with its stamens. The lotus-chain is like soft autumn moonlight upon her bosom. But the tortured king realises that he is like a weary traveller who scorned the stream and now seeks in the mirage to quench



his thirst. Even the painting gets discoloured by the tears he cannot control. "I cannot sleep at night and seek her dreaming. I cannot see the sketch since tears are streaming."

Indra's appeal for help in the war with the demons comes as a welcome relief. After the successful conclusion of the battle, the king returns to earth in Indra's air-borne chariot. From the abysses of space, the car descends to the cloud-haunted lower heights. The wheels, as they roll over water-laden clouds, become wet with drops. The lustre of the lightning glows on the bodies of the horses, moist with perspiration and cloud vapour. The aerial perspective is realised with superb poetry. Dushyanta looks down and exclaims: "How wonderful is the appearance of the earth as we rapidly descend! The earth appears to sink below the crests of mountains which swiftly rise into view. The trees, whose trunks seemed but just now hidden within their leafy tresses, emerge in clearer form and display their branching shoulders. The streams which seemed thin and waterless now become distinct rivers. The earth, full of men, seems upward hurled by some gigantic power."

The air-borne chariot alights near the hermitage of Maricha. Immediately his right arm throbs, <sup>an auspicious</sup> an auspicious sign. But the ground-tone of his life is one of frustration and he does not take it seriously. However, the surroundings remind him of an earlier occasion and a similar venue when the arm had throbbed. Were the consequences happy? Dushyanta does not want to think any more about the auspicious sign. But immediately, behind the stage is heard an exhortation: "Do not be rash." <sup>Remembering</sup> The words are addressed to Shakuntala's child, who has snatched a lion cub from its mother and is trying to count its teeth. But the exhortation recalls to Dushyanta the appeal of the hermits when he pursued his chase of the antelope into the sheltered retreat. The chain of association begins to build up fast in roused remembrance. The hermits had blessed him that he might become the father of a world-conqueror. That dream has been shattered. Immediately he sees the impetuous boy struggling with the lion cub. Who might this plucky youngster be? He envies his parents, and all parents in general. "Ah, happy father, happy mother, who, carrying their little son, are soiled with dust from his body! The child nestles with fond faith in their lap, the refuge that he craves.



The white buds of his teeth are just visible, when he breaks out into a causeless smile and attempts sweet, wordless sounds, melting the heart more than any word." Shakuntala now appears on the scene and the burden of years is shed.

Kalidasa's poetic powers are at their best in this play. But they are not dissipated as in *Vikramorvasiya* but conserved and blended with profoundly moral perceptions. There is no need to think up an involved apology for the incident of the sage's curse in the fear that it is an awkward intrusion of casual chance which grows monstrously as a purely external destiny. In fact, there is a very subtle study of the determinism of heredity and environment in this play. Neither is final. What counts in the last analysis is self-discipline, living for others. Shakuntala was the daughter of Menaka, the nymph, whom Indra sent to tempt ascetics to suspend their austerities. She tempts Viswamitra and Shakuntala was the fruit of this interlude. From her mother she inherited her beauty and the normal impulses of adolescence. But Menaka belonged to a sophisticated environment, she was really a hetaera of Indra's heaven. Shakuntala was lucky to obtain a wholly different environment. Her mission over, Menaka had abandoned the child in the forest. The infant was nursed by the birds of the air and later adopted by Kanva. She grows up like a woodland blossom. Her youth, beauty and impulses know no repression, but they are not abused as was the case with Menaka. If the mother seduced an ascetic, by a strange poetic justice, a king from a court as sophisticated as Indra's heaven seduces the daughter. But, if her mother was a nymph, Shakuntala's father was an ascetic and tragedy provides an occasion for this part of the heredity to become dominant. The impure elements of heredity are burnt away in suffering and the gold in it is refined to greater lustre. The first union of courtier and woodland maid was the result of not necessarily morbid, but certainly amoral, impulses. The second union comes after a profound moral growth on the part of both, contributed by the experience of the tragic. Rhetorical as Goethe's tribute is, the blossoms of spring do mature here into the fruits of autumn, earth and heaven do meet in the end.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

## Later Drama

1. *Visakhadatta*

WE HAVE already noticed one tragedy in the Indian dramatic tradition—the failure of subsequent dramatists to appreciate the significance of Bhasa's *Uru Bhanga* as a foundation on which tragic drama could have been developed. We come across another tragic arrest in the Indian tradition when we see that the well-knit drama of intrigue, packed with incident, yet moving rapidly and maintaining suspense to the last, did not evolve as a distinct and great species, though Visakhadatta gave a brilliant model in his *Mudra Rakshasa*.<sup>1</sup> But orthodox scholarship could not appreciate the greatness of this play, which did not seem to pay respect to the traditional canons. The hero is not an amorous king or aristocrat, but a minister involved in diplomatic offensive or counter-offensive. There is no heroine, no love-interest.

Visakhadatta's date is controversial. There is a reference in the play<sup>2</sup> to a king Chandra Gupta whose land is said to be troubled by foreigners. Scholars like Jayaswal,<sup>3</sup> Konow,<sup>4</sup> and Sastri<sup>5</sup> have interpreted this as a reference to a contemporary king whom they regard to have been Chandra Gupta II of the Gupta dynasty (375-413). Charpentier<sup>6</sup> makes the dramatist a contemporary of one of the last Guptas, probably Samudra Gupta, Keith<sup>7</sup> prefers the ninth century. Jacobi, on the basis of astronomical calculations, identifies the eclipse mentioned in the play as having occurred on December 2, 860. Other versions mention Dantivarman, Rantivarman or Avantivarman in place of Chandra Gupta. But there were two Avantivarmans, one belonging to the seventh century and the other to the ninth.<sup>8</sup> In view of all this, the only conclusion possible is that the dramatist lived at some period before the ninth century, though, as De<sup>9</sup> has pointed out, there is nothing to prevent him from having belonged to the older group of dramatists who were the immediate successors of Kalidasa.

It is difficult to attempt a summary of the plot, as its intrigue and counter-intrigue and rapidly evolving episodes can become



breathlessly incoherent in an epitome. The opening itself is characteristically vigorous. The director refers to an eclipse, the Sanskrit word for which would literally mean capture of the moon (Chandra)—by the earth's shadow which in popular mythology was regarded as a monster, Ketu. There is a pun on the word and from behind the stage we find Chanakya (Kautilya) the minister of Chandragupta Maurya, thundering: "Who threatens the king when I am alive?" The author of the *Artha Sastra*, implacably pursuing historical purposes, comes to life before us. Lack of unity had ruined India. So Chanakya had decided to build up a monolithic empire. The Nanda dynasty had been overthrown and Chandragupta Maurya established on the throne. "This country did never feel secure as long as the Nandas were ruling. Now it has been united under one sovereignty."<sup>10</sup> His grey eminence scorns to be tempted by any thought of power for himself. His purpose achieved, he now wants to retire. But the realm needs an able minister. Rakshasa, the minister of the vanquished Nandas, is the only man who can take over from him. He is the greatest enemy of the Mauryas. Chanakya is implacable, but he has no personal hatreds, for there is nobody so great in stature as to become his rival and therefore the object of his hatred. Rakshasa too is selfless in his own way. He does not want any power for himself, but he is determined to avenge the overthrow of the Nandas. Like any minister, he too is familiar with the intricacies of the game of diplomacy and espionage. But he is a better soldier than a plotter. Chanakya initiates a course of brilliant stratagems which at last leave no option to Rakshasa but to come over to the side of the Mauryas. The turbulent course of the play is held together and the unity of action preserved by the steady drive of Chanakya's brilliant mind towards the fulfilment of his purpose.

In a splendid passage in the play,<sup>11</sup> the dramatist is compared to the statesman. Both are capable of working on slender materials, or of developing the same, concealing at the same time the possibilities, and of keeping that development throughout under their control even as they confront and solve problems. Visakhadatta made a drama out of poor material, for a story without love-interest or heroine would not have been accepted as good material by any other dramatist. His hero, Chanakya, likewise,



scorns the use of armies and manages his aims by apparently less impressive means. "Let me not lose my intellectual powers which, to achieve my object, are far more efficacious than armies."<sup>12</sup>

It is not surprising that the author of the *Artha Sastra*, who relies so much on espionage, makes extensive and ruthless use of spies. The spy Nipunaka goes about like a peep-show man and manages to get Rakshasa's signet ring from his little son. This ring is subsequently used to forge documents. The spies themselves remain unknown to one another. Thus, one spy reports against Jivasiddhi to Chanakya, but Jivasiddhi is another secret service man employed by that astute minister on a different assignment. Sakatadasa, another spy, is arrested, but is rescued from the scaffold by Siddharthaka, yet another spy. Jivasiddhi is also banished in ignominy. Both Sakatadasa and Jivasiddhi flee to Rakshasa and are given welcome. Thus Chanakya manages to plant his spies right in the enemy's innermost ranks.

Chanakya quarrels with his king, resigns office and leaves in high dudgeon. None realises that this too is a stratagem. Clues help in detection. The conspirators, who were to issue from a subterranean passage into the king's bed-chamber and assassinate him, are detected through the clue of ants, bearing the remnants of a recent meal, issuing from the underground, and are promptly burnt in their hiding place. Sometimes there are set-backs which further build up the suspense. Rakshasa's effort to poison Chandragupta miscarries. Chanakya, who comes to know of the attempt, manipulates it in such a way that the victim is Parvatesa, who, though he is an ally of Chandragupta, has outlived his usefulness and may become a rival. But this has an unexpected consequence. Parvatesa's son Malayaketu suspects the minister and king and goes over to Rakshasa.

Visakhadatta uses a direct, forcible diction admirably suited to the rapid tempo of his play and to his characters, all of whom are busy, practical-minded people. Inspiringly vigorous is Malayaketu's exhortation to war. "Then let us march. Our mighty elephants shall drink the Soan's dark waves and echo back the roaring of its waters, spread through the groves that shade the river's bordering fields an intenser gloom and, faster than the undermining torrents, hurl its high banks into the boiling stream. Then they shall roll onwards like a line of clouds that girt in rain



and thunder Vindhya's peaks, surround with portentous storm the city and lay its proud walls level with the ground." Chanakya's brilliant stratagem makes Malayaketu convinced that the vassal princes who had flocked to his standard against Chandragupta were planning treachery against himself. The incensed young man decides to dispose of the unfortunates, who had asked for more lands as their share of the war booty, with grim humour. "Those who desired my land, take and cast into a pit and cover with dust! Those who wanted my army of elephants, slay by an elephant!"

The references to nature are very few and brief, but apposite. There is a casual description of autumn by the king when he is being led to his rooms by the chamberlain. He observes the refreshing beauty of the season and compares the quarters with rivers flowing from the heaven. The white rainless clouds are their sandbanks over which fly the sweetly cackling cranes, and the twinkling stars are like blooming lotuses.<sup>13</sup> Characters who are sensitive but are preoccupied with martial events do not have more time to stand and stare. In perfect harmony with the mood of the play is another brief description,<sup>14</sup> which sees autumn as a disciplinarian, who has brought the turbulent rivers under control and made them run in their proper channels, bent low the paddy stalks with heavy grain, and calmed down the excessive lust of the peacocks. Equally fine and apposite is Rakshasa's brief musing over the dusk. Racing against time with his plans for a last offensive, when everything seems to have gone wrong, he asks his attendant: "What is the hour?" "Near sunset, Sir." "Indeed, so near the time, when, like the slaves who flee from a lord whom fortune has abandoned, the trees that cast their shadows at dawn with servile speed before the rising sun, now turn them backward from his downward course."

Like Chanakya, Rakshasa too is free from any personal ambition. But he feels it is his duty to avenge the defeat of the king whom he had served and no setbacks can discourage him. "Is it because Sesha (the giant snake in Hindu mythology who holds up the earth, like Atlas in Greek myth) feels not the pain of the burden of the earth that he flings it not aside? Is it that the sun feels no weariness, because he never stands still in his course? No, a noble man feels shame to lay aside the duty he has taken



on him. For the lofty spirits, this is the one absolute law, to be faithful to what one has undertaken." Though he has to stoop to intrigues and counter-espionage, he feels much happier in the field. "Around the ramparts be the archers set at once! Station at the portals the elephants, strong to overthrow the host of the foeman's herd! Lay fear aside, in eagerness to smite the host of the foe that cannot withstand us, and issue forth with me with one accord, all to whom glory is dear!"

Rakshasa is no match for Chanakya. But even in his final defeat he is shown as noble and lovable by the dramatist. Rakshasa would have continued to resist to the last, if it was merely a question of adverse developments in war and diplomacy. But his loyal friend Chandana Dasa has been cornered by Chanakya in such a way that he faces execution as a traitor, though innocent. Chanakya admires his loyalty to Rakshasa but pushes on implacably with the stratagem. Chandana Dasa prepares to leave the world. "One moment only—let me kiss my boy. Loved child, farewell! Remember, all that lives must die. But he who goes to his death to serve his friend dies with honour." The crisis completely overwhelms Rakshasa. Earlier, when he had realized that Jivasiddhi who had been admitted to his innermost counsels was a spy, he had cried out: "My very heart has been made their own by my foes." But, in a profounder way, his heart now betrays him to the enemy's camp. "Indifference is impossible since my dear friend has fallen into this disaster for my sake. My own life do I set as ransom for him." He hastens to the rescue to find that his heart has not indeed betrayed him to the enemy, for he is wanted as a minister. Even before Chanakya's deeper purposes are revealed to him, the fairminded man cannot withhold a tribute. "This must be himself, the vile Chanakya. Rather, let me own, the wise Chanakya, an exhaustless mine of learning, a deep ocean stored with gems of robust excellence. Let not my envy deny his merits." The greatest merit of that statesman stands revealed only at the very end—the recognition of the ability of Rakshasa, though he belonged to the opposite camp, and the surrender to him of all power, in the interests of the state.



II. *Harsha*

The ascription of the authorship of the three plays, *Priya Darsika*, *Ratnavali*, and *Nagananda*, to Emperor Harsha of the seventh century has not gone uncontested.<sup>15</sup> A shadowy Dhavaka, elsewhere unheard of, and Bana have been suggested as ghost-writers for the monarch, on the very slender basis that Mammata<sup>16</sup> casually refers to these two as having been well patronised by Harsha. But Yi Tsing,<sup>17</sup> in the last quarter of the seventh century, clearly refers to a dramatization of the *Nagananda* story by Harsha. And Damodara Gupta,<sup>18</sup> in the ninth century, refers to a performance of *Ratnavali* and ascribes the work distinctly to Harsha. Mammata came much later, in the eleventh or early twelfth century.

The first two plays are pleasant love-intrigues and, surprisingly enough, have the same hero, Udayana, King of Vatsa. The bigamous situation in which Udayana found himself in Bhasa was not of his own seeking and indeed it is graced by delicacy and pathos. But in Harsha's plays, Udayana takes after the Agnimitra of Kalidasa. In *Priya Darsika* he flirts with Aranyaka, in *Ratnavali* with Sagarika, both lowly maidens of unknown status. Both plots are cast in the same mould. Secret meetings are arranged mainly through the help of the Vidushaka and the damsel's friend, a crisis is precipitated by the queen's jealousy and the resolution is effected by the revelation that the maiden is really a princess.

No originality thus need be expected in the plot. *Priya Darsika* is indebted to *Shakuntala* in addition to *Malavikagnimitra*. The love-sick king recalls the desolate Dushyanta though Harsha has used his own imagery, generally felicitous. "Day's beauty is departed, like my dearest, taking away with her the beauty of the lotus clusters. In the sinking orb of the sun, as in this heart of mine, Raga (means red glow as well as passionate longing) comes to dwell. On the rim of the lotus pool stands forlorn, like me, the love-bird, thinking of his mate. The quarters too have suddenly grown dark, like the depths of my own heart." This gloom is occasioned by the departure of Aranyaka after the first meeting which takes place in the garden which is really Shakuntala's garden in the hermitage transferred to Udayana's palace. "Dear fellow," the Vidushaka tells the king, "look, look at the loveliness



of this garden of the fountain-house, where the surface of the stone slab is made soft by the various flowers that ceaselessly fall upon it, where the buds of the jasmine creeper are broken by the weight of the bees, where the stalks of the Bandhuka inflorescences are stirred by the wanton breeze loaded with the perfume of the lotus and where the sunlight and the heat are shut out by the dense Tamala trees." Bees attack Aranyaka who now strolls into the garden with her friend and the king comes to the rescue, a detail bodily lifted from *Shakuntala*.

*Priya Darsika*, however, shows one brilliant innovation—a play within a play. The dancing contest in *Malavikagnimitra* could have been a germinal inspiration, but Harsha develops it with brilliant success. The characters of a play themselves becoming the spectators of a play within the play contributes effectively to the achievement of reality in the staged presentation. Quite apart from this, the handling is very adroit. The playlet is supposed to be written by Sankrtyayani, friend of queen Vasavadatta. The interesting feature is that its theme is an incident in the courtship of the king and queen themselves. Aranyaka is entrusted with the queen's part. The king's role is to be performed by another of the queen's maids, Manorama. But the king decides to play the role himself, without the knowledge of the queen. The superb histrionical powers of this character astound the queen. When the king makes his first appearance in the play, he is so much like her husband (naturally!) that the queen rises in her seat and cries out: "Hail, hail to my lord!" The king has one fit of panic, fearing that he has been recognized. But the queen was only paying a tribute to Manorama, who is supposed to be playing that role. However, as the play proceeds, the queen finds that the ardour of the lovers on the stage is far more intense than warranted by the libretto. In the early days of courtship, Vasavadatta never sat in the same seat with Udayana. But Aranyaka settles down cosily by his side. With increasing embarrassment she sees the king on the stage take Aranyaka's hand. When the intimacies increase she suddenly sees light, stormily calls off the play and has Aranyaka locked up. The crisis is finally resolved when Aranyaka, the palace maid, is revealed to be Priya Darsika, the princess of Anga.

The plot of *Ratnavali*<sup>19</sup> is cast in the same mould. Harsha's



suave imagery helps to relieve the monotony. There is a fine description of the rising moon by the king. "Our minds absorbed in the festival, we saw not that twilight had ebbed away. Look, the glowing east proclaims the lord of night, still hidden by the mountain where he rises, even as a maiden by her pale face shows that in her inmost heart a lover dwells." A parrot which escapes from its cage and repeats in the presence of the king Sagarika's confession of love for him to her friend, is one interesting device, though not so effective as the play within the play of *Priya Darsika*. Another episode brings out the adroitness of Harsha better. Racking his brains to devise a scheme for contriving a meeting between the king and the maid, the Vidushaka suggests that Sagarika should dress herself as the queen and go to the rendezvous. But the plot is overheard and it is queen Vasavadatta herself who keeps the rendezvous. The ardent king does not know this and is chagrined when, after listening to his declarations of love, she reveals herself as really the queen and bitterly reproaches him. Sagarika, who had come on the scene too late, hears of the king's plight. Dejected, she ties a noose to her neck, but is rescued by the king who, however, mistakes her for Vasavadatta whom, he fears, his disloyalty has driven to suicide. He recognizes his error, but his joy is short-lived, for the queen, ashamed of her anger, now returns to make friends with her husband and discovers that he is not worthy of the gesture. For the incensed lady comes upon a touching union of lovers and in violent anger she carries off the maiden captive. But Sagarika is at last revealed to be princess Ratnavali, the cousin of the queen herself.

✓ Harsha is best in the light, elegant touch and his attempt at  
 \* serious drama in the *Nagananda*<sup>20</sup> has not been very successful. Here he adopts the Buddhist legend of a prince who offered himself in the place of a snake as the food of Garuda, the great eagle of Vishnu. But the first three acts deal with Jimuta Vahana's love for Malayavati and this section of the play is not satisfactorily integrated with the remaining sequence. The first phase is also full of conventional devices. Malayavati, sister of Mitravasu, prince of the Siddhas, has had a dream in which goddess Gauri has revealed to her, her future husband. Jimuta Vahana, hidden behind a thicket, overhears her confiding this dream to her friend. The Vidushaka arranges a meeting. In the second act Malayavati is



love-sick, resting on a stone seat in the garden. A sound makes her move away, when the king enters, equally depressed, declares his love and paints his beloved. Mitravasu comes to offer him his sister's hand. Now, Jimuta Vahana is supposed to have fallen in love with the girl without knowing who she is—a weak link in the play. So he declines Mitravasu's offer, not knowing that the latter's sister is his beloved. The girl deems herself disdained and seeks to hang herself, but her friends rescue her and call for aid. Jimuta Vahana appears and proves that she is his love by showing the picture he had painted. The marriage is concluded. So far, the play is cast in the elegant, erotic mould of the courtly play. Tribute to the beauty of the beloved has the familiar ring. "The burden of thy bosom is enough to weary thy waist. Why then add the weight of thy necklace? Thy thighs are wearied by bearing thy hips. Why then the girdle of bells? Thy feet can barely carry the load of thy thighs. Why then add the anklets? When in every limb thou dost possess such grace, why dost thou wear ornaments to thy weariness?" The shyness of the new bride recalls the shyness of Parvati in Kalidasa's *Kumara Sambhava*. "Looked at, she lowers her face; addressed, she gives no reply; with head averted she lies on the couch; forcibly embraced, she trembles; when her maidens leave her chamber, she also seeks to depart; perverse though she be, my new-wed love delights me more and more."

The play could have ended here. But the mood changes with the third act. Jimuta Vahana is a prince of the Vidyadharas and an enemy overruns his kingdom. Mitravasu offers help. "With their chariots overspreading the whole sky as they speed along, darkening the day as when the sun's rays are hidden in the rain, my soldiers await but the order to go forth to battle. But say the word, and thy haughty foe shall fall, and thy kingdom be returned to thee." But Jimuta Vahana replies, "Gladly, unasked, would I give my own life for another in compassion. How then could I consent to the cruel slaughter of men merely to win a realm?" Later, he offers himself to Garuda in place of Sankha Chuda, a Naga (serpent) youth. The goddess Gauri rescues him and returns his kingdom to him. There is dignity in his admonition of Garuda. "Cease for ever from taking life. Repent of thy past misdeeds. Eagerly accumulate a store of merit, freeing all crea-



tures from fear of thee, so that, lost in the infinite stream of thy goodness, the past sin may cease to generate consequences, even as a morsel of salt cast in the unfathomable depths of a great lake." But, quite apart from the fact that the eagle cannot help eating snakes, what may seem noble in a sermon need not necessarily be ideal dramatic material. Divine intervention makes what could have been a noble tragedy into a fable with a pleasant ending. The theme of the love for Malayavati shrivels up in the middle of the play. It is not the prince's love which inspires the sacrifice, nor is it rendered difficult by the memory of that love. Structurally, the play falls into two fragments imperfectly integrated with each other.

### III. Bhavabhuti

Kalhana<sup>21</sup> states that Bhavabhuti was patronised by King Yasovarman of Kanyakubja. The reign of this king covered the closing years of the seventh century or the first quarter of the eighth. In the prologues of his plays, Bhavabhuti gives interesting details about his family. He was a scholar, but mercifully, a greater poet. He was in close touch with actors. All his plays were enacted at the festival of Lord Mahakala whose shrine at Ujjaini is mentioned by both Kalidasa and Bana. The royal patronage he received does not seem to have been on a very affluent scale.

The *Malati Madhava*<sup>22</sup> is a delightful romantic comedy of middle-class life. Among the principal characters is the Buddhist nun Kamandaki who keeps a school in the city of Padmavati. There were educated two youngmen who became ministers in the neighbouring states. Madhava, the son of one of them, later joins the school and Malati, the daughter of the other, also becomes a special charge of the nun. She turns match-maker like Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Bhavabhuti prides himself on the originality of his plot in a passage in the play.<sup>23</sup> And it has undeniable ingenuity, being built up, not on one love-story, but two parallel love-stories. Trouble arises when Nandana, a favourite of the Raja of Padmavati, falls in love with Malati. Her father, being minister to the king, finds it difficult to go against his wishes. But on the wed-



ding day, Malati is impersonated by Makaranda, a friend of Madhava, and the consternation of the foiled bridegroom provides boisterous comedy. Another amusing development is that Nandana's sister, Madayantika, who is in love with Makaranda, confesses her love to him, taking him to be Malati. This parallels the earlier episode where Madhava had taken the place of Lavangika, Malati's companion, and heard from the unsuspecting girl her passion for himself.

But Bhavabhuti cannot restrain himself and crowds the play with incidents. Some of the episodes help in building up suspense but strain the sense of probability. Thus, once, when Madhava is in despair of obtaining the hand of Malati, he goes to the temple of Kali, to find that Malati has been kidnapped and is about to be offered as a human sacrifice by the Tantric priest, Aghoraghanta. Powerful is the evocation of the horror of the temple in the cemetery. "Now wake the terrors of the place, beset with crowding, malignant fiends. The flames from funeral pyres scarce lend their sullen light, clogged with their fleshy burden, to dissipate the terrible gloom. The dissonant mirth and shrill shrieks of awful shades echo in the desolation wild." Madhava kills the priest and rescues Malati. This provides occasion for another incident, when Kapala Kundala, the priest's sister, abducts Malati for taking revenge. Madhava's rescue of Malati from the temple parallels Makaranda's rescue of Madayantika from a tiger. We begin to feel that crowding the play with such incidents only serves to clog it, unreasonably expand its length and lower the dramatic quality by making it move nearer to the mood of fables.

But Bhavabhuti's greatest asset is his ability to express emotions naturally, without flamboyant rhetoric. When Malati is abducted, the old nun laments: "My body is aflame and my heart torn asunder by the memory of the childish movements which grew more delightful every hour from thy birth, and of the beauty and sweetness of thy loving words." He has a greater insight into the excitability of young hearts and the firm bond into which young love can grow than the usual run of Sanskrit dramatists. Makaranda says that the potent will of love wanders unobstructed in this world, youth is susceptible and every sweet and charming thing troubles the firmness of the mind. Madhava is baffled when



he tries to analyse this sweet obsession. "An emotion, evading analysis, inexpressible by words, never before experienced in my life, is at once numbing me within and filling me with a torment of fire." The old nun is a firm believer in love as the basis of marriage and in the sacredness of the marital bond. "The only important and auspicious circumstance for a marriage is mutual love.... Know, my dear children, that to a wife her husband, and to a husband his wife, are, each to each, the dearest of friends, the sum total of relationships, the completeness of desire, the perfection of treasures, even life itself."

The young dramatist, who could not restrain himself when he had to invent a plot, showed remarkable maturity when he attempted to dramatise the story of the Ramayana up to the return from Lanka and the coronation, in the *Mahavira Charita*.<sup>24</sup> The genuineness of the last two acts of this seven-act play has been questioned.<sup>25</sup> But even the first five acts are enough to show that, when he sets his mind to it, Bhavabhuti can structure a well-knit drama from a leisurely narrative. His modifications are radical and bold. First of all, Rama and Sita are made to meet long before their marriage. While Rama was living in the forests with Viswamitra, Kusadhwaja, brother of Janaka, visits the sage along with Sita and the young people meet and become mutually enamoured. The subsequent story is built up as a feud of Ravana against Rama because the former is also a suitor for Sita's hand and is repulsed. Ravana's desire for revenge at this insult to his pride is further inflamed by the death of Tataka, Subahu and other demons at Rama's hands. Malayavan, Ravana's minister, emerges as a brilliant diplomat and it is he who instigates Parasu Rama, the inveterate enemy of the Kshatriyas, against Rama. When that stratagem does not yield much, he sends Surpanakha in the guise of Manthara to poison the mind of Kaikeyi and make her demand the exile of Rama. In the forests, the abduction of Sita is easily managed. In order to frustrate Rama's efforts, Malayavan intrigues with Bali. This way of shaping the story serves the two-fold purpose of exculpating the dubious conduct of Rama in ambushing Bali and avoiding the unseemly fraternal quarrel between Bali and Sugriva. But Bali dies and with him the last hope of the diplomatic offensive. The story now moves on to the battle and the victory of Rama. Though the quality



of the descriptions is not up to the level of the other plays, there are some fine passages. Thus Jatayu comes to Janasthana just before the abduction of Sita. "There, amidst Janasthana's frowning woods, the tall Prasravana peak holds up his head, tinted dark by the clouds, and bathes his brow with thin descending dews. Thence, through his gorges, the mountain accumulates the oozing moisture and sends forth the pure Godavari to win her way, stately and clear, through ancient woods that shade, imperviously tangled, her majestic course."

Both poetic sensitiveness and dramatic power mature and blend in *Uttara Rama Charita*,<sup>26</sup> which depicts in seven acts the later history of Rama extending from the exile of Sita to their final reunion. Indian tradition has conceded to Bhavabhuti a place immediately next to Kalidasa on the basis of this play. This writer at least feels that Bhavabhuti has become the equal of Kalidasa as a dramatist, though Kalidasa may excel him as a poet. Profoundly moving though the tragic experience of Shakuntala and Dushyanta is, it is confined to the smaller horizon of personal loss and reunion. Though Dushyanta's dilettantism is not excused, it is accented in a very subtle manner and on the surface at least, the device of the sage's curse helps to take away the sting of guilt. Kalidasa thus avoids too great a conflict and concentrates on the tragedy of separation. But Bhavabhuti has to confront the almost unbearable tension of a conflict. Rama, the king, has to do terrible violence to Rama, the individual.

When the play opens, we find that Sita is deprived of the company of the women-folk of the palace, though she needs them badly because she is about to be a mother. The old wives of Dasaratha have gone to the hermitage of Risyasringa where a great ritual, which will take years to finish, is commencing. Kausalya consoles herself with the thought that Rama's company would be sufficient to comfort Sita. Tragic irony, of which Bhavabhuti makes the most poignant use, begins to raise its head here.

The departure of everybody has made even Rama slightly dejected. In the opening scene, the actor tells the director that they will have to be very careful in their use of words since Rama is not in a good mood and may be quick to find fault with the play. Agreeing with him, the Sutradhara says, "You cannot be too careful either of words or of woman. People will misunder-



stand and misinterpret them." "That reminds me," whispers the actor, "do you know, our people are talking scandal even against Sita on account of her stay in Lanka? They don't believe in the fire-ordeal." The Sutradhara prays: "Pray God this scandal does not find its way to Rama."

Within the palace, Rama is trying to cheer up Sita. "Separation from relatives is always distressing," says Sita, words naturally spoken by her, but loaded with an ominous ring for us. The sage Ashtavakra now arrives from Risyasringa's hermitage. With a child-like petulance Sita wants to know if people still remember her there. Not only do they remember her, but Vasishta, the preceptor of the kings of the line of Raghu, has sent a message specially for her. "Earth, the universal mother, is your mother. The great Janaka is your father. You are the daughter-in-law of that royal house of which the Sun God and myself are the preceptors. What else shall we desire for you? Be a mother of heroes." It is a noble benediction, but we are chilled by an omission that Rama and Sita do not notice. Vasishta has not mentioned that, besides being the daughter of earth, she is also the spouse of Rama. She is asked to remember the greatness of the house to which she has come as daughter-in-law, to look forward to being the mother of heroes. But about her great status as the wife of Rama, there is ominous silence. There is a message from Vasishta to Rama also—that the interests of the subjects are the only interests of a king. In response to the message, Rama bursts out heriocolly and states that to please his subjects he would even abandon his beloved Sita. It is an excited and exalted rhetorical statement, but destiny, hovering over the desolate palace, will force it into a commitment.

There is a slight relaxation in the tension when Lakshmana enters with some of the paintings on the story of the period of exile which the palace painter had been commissioned to execute as a complete series. "How far has the painter covered our exile?" asks Rama. "As far as the purification through the fire-ordeal," replies Lakshmana. Rama muses over that episode and exclaims: "Who could purify my Sita who is pure from her very birth? Fire and holy water need no purification." The whole past re-emerges, seen as in a mist through the veil of unshed tears, when Rama looks at the pictures one by one. "I feel I am reliving the



moment when I held in marriage your hand that was joy incarnate. . . . I remember it, oh, I remember it. Then my dear father was still alive, we were still groom and bride and were tenderly taken care of by our mothers. Gone are those days." Sita was a very young girl at the time of the marriage. "A mere child, with a few tiny curls playing about the temples, she pleased my mothers with her artless grace." Even the exile had brought happiness, for they were together, a world to each other. "Do you remember the Godavari with its sweet water, and our rambles along its banks? . . . As, slowly and gently, cheek pressed against cheek, we whispered soft nothings, each clasping the other with warm embrace, the night, whose watches had sped unnoticed, drew to a close." The next painting is sombre, depicting Rama tragically alone after Sita's abduction. "In this lake, the tracts full of white lotuses, with their stalks waving, shaken by the wings of the Mallikaksha birds warbling in hilarity, seemed blue to me, glimpsed indistinctly in the intervals of the falling and rising of tears." The hour of another separation is now drawing near. Sita trembles. "The gloom has so covered me up that I feel as if I am again separated from my husband." Rama cries out to Lakshmana who is showing the pictures one by one: "Stop, Lakshmana! I feel as if I am once again separated from my Sita."

Lakshmana leaves and the two are left alone. Sita is tired and goes to sleep, with Rama's arm as pillow for her head. Awake alone in that room where the deep shadows of twilight have fallen, Rama contemplates his tired, sleeping wife, and tells himself, "I am happy. Such love as ours comes only once in a while and lucky is the man to whom it does." The irony is that even as he is musing thus, the spy, commissioned to report on rumours and public opinion, is standing outside the door with the terrible news of the scandal about Sita. Rama continues to muse. "Her touch here on my body is as fragrant as sandal paste; her arm round my neck is cool and soft as a necklace of pearls. What in her is there that is not dear, save only the misery of separation from her?" The last word in this soliloquy is separation (*Viraha*). By the use of the dramatic juxtaposition with which we became familiar in Bhasa, the word is syntactically connected with the first word (*upastitah*: has arrived) announced by the attendant who now enters. What she has to say is that the spy has arrived.



But the ominous resonance is that the hour of separation has come.

Even as he reports the scandal, the spy condemns the <sup>rascals</sup> rabble. "Our queen has gone through the fire and proved her purity. She bears in her womb a holy offspring. My lord, you should not take seriously these foul-mouthed rascals." But Rama is now the king, pitiless towards himself as the individual. With an objectivity that stabs his heart, he tries to see the situation from the point of view of his people. "God help you if you think my subjects wicked! How can they believe in the fire-ordeal that took place in far away Lanka?" The play now moves irrevocably to the tragic decision to exile Sita. The unsuspecting queen is taken out for what she thinks is a pleasure-ride. As she gets into the chariot, she tells the charioteer to be careful. "My womb throbs". The terrible impact of the tragedy is vividly revealed much later also when she contemplates her son and prays: "Let my son not be separated from his beloved."

A flurry of comments, from people of widely differing temperaments, scattered throughout the play, reveals how tragically alone Rama has to be in his decision, how he has to resolve the conflict within himself, between king and individual, without the support of anyone close to him who can understand and sympathise. Goddess Earth, the mother of Sita, is understandably the most unforgiving. In the last act, when Sita calls out to Rama, "O my lord, my husband!", she turns on her bitterly and asks, "Who is your lord, your husband?" Sumantra, the old charioteer, who has seen three generations of the royal house, laments: "The very seed of all our desires has been removed. When the plant is cut off, how can there be a flower?" Even Kusa, Rama's own son, but as yet unidentified, punishes him, later in the sixth act, by pitying him. "Without his Sita, could Rama be anything but miserable?" The tragic experience of Rama is far deeper than that of Dushyanta.

Rama receives fresh wounds, from both remembrance stirred by scenes revisited alone and from direct accusations, when he goes to Panchavati. In the epic, there is no uncertainty about Sita's fate after she had been exiled to the forests. Everybody in the court knows that Valmiki has given her shelter. Bhavabhuti makes a radical change, leaving Rama and the others in



complete ignorance of her fate, in order to deepen the pathos. In Panchavati, Rama meets Vasanti, a spirit of the woods, and has to listen to her barbed words. "How hard is your heart! Do you think your fame, that you place higher than all, is now unsullied? What is more infamous than abandoning a helpless woman? . . . 'Thou art my life, my second heart, the moon-light of my eyes, the ambrosia for my body'; with these and a hundred other endearments didst thou win her simple soul, and now alas—but what need to say more?" Rama pours out his heart. Another radical change from the epic introduced by Bhavabhuti is to make Sita present on this occasion, though in spirit-form, invisible to both Rama and Vasanti. She had been terribly hurt by Rama's rejection, but had been too loyal to blame him. With a great delicacy of touch, the dramatist describes her gradual, but generous surrender to the proof that, though seemingly harsh, he deeply loves her, and has suffered as intensely as she herself. Illogical, but characteristically feminine and profoundly human, is her resentment now against Vasanti for being harsh to her beloved Rama.

In the fourth and fifth acts, Rama does not appear at all. But the pervasive mood of the play saturates them too and integrates them into the whole composition. We are in constant touch with Rama's sorrow and its cause—the misery of Sita. We are in the midst of those who are dear to Sita and to whom Sita is dear—Janaka, Kausalya, and the twins, Lava and Kusa, the children of Rama and Sita. In the fourth act we are in the hermitage of Janaka, who has retired from kingly duties. Memories of Sita still haunt the old man though over twelve years have gone by. "I remember your lotus-face, when a child, with its irregular weepings or smiles, with a few tender, budding teeth, and with its faltering, incoherent, sweet babbling." Kausalya, Rama's mother, comes to meet him, but she faints on seeing him. The kindly Arundhati knows the reason. "That king, that happiness, that knot of children, those days—all this emerged before her mind's eye at the sight of you, her friend, and therefore she fainted; for the heart of mothers is as tender as a flower." The tension is relieved by the boisterous merry-making of boys behind stage. Janaka says: "Today having been declared a holiday on account of the arrival of distinguished guests, the youngsters are at play."



The children come in and among them is Lava. Memories are stirred once again. Sumantra gazes on him and whispers to himself: "My heart, why dost thou indulge in fancies?" Janaka is also troubled. "Alas, destiny! how my agitated mind speeds along wild paths!" Kausalya says to herself: "He resembles dear Rama not only in his bodily frame that has the dusky bright hue of a garland of blue lotuses a little opened, but also in his voice, very deep like the note of a royal swan whose throat has been rendered melodious by feeding on lotus-filaments."

In the next act, the horse for the imperial sacrifice of Rama comes to the hermitage. The boys of the woods are excited and tell Lava about the animal. "Behind, it has a huge tail which it shakes constantly. Its neck is long and it has four hoofs like other animals. It eats grass and throws out balls of dung as big as mangoes. But why describe it thus? It is going farther and farther off. Come, come, let us go and see it." Prince Chandra Ketu, son of Lakshmana, is guarding the animal. The convention is that all rulers should allow it unhampered movement as token of vassalage accepted. Those who seize the animal will be punished by the imperial armies. When Chandra Ketu meets Lava, something stirs deep within the former. "Is it this chance encounter, or his wealth of splendid qualities, or an ancient love, firm bound in a former birth, or a common tie of blood unknown through the might of fate, which draws close my heart to him even at first sight?" But Lava seizes the horse, and as he will not surrender it, a battle is inevitable. A Vidyadhara and his wife, flying in the air, describe the battle of the youthful heroes. The arrival of Rama interrupts the conflict. He meets Kusa as well, and his heart warms towards the youths. In the epic, Rama meets the children, not in the forest, but in the palace where they come as bards reciting Valmiki's composition on the story of Rama. At the sight of Rama, Lava also feels strangely subdued. "At his sight all hostility has suddenly ceased and a rare joy floods over me. My intemperate mood has vanished."

In the last act, Rama comes to the banks of the Ganges where a play by Valmiki is to be presented. Sita's fortunes after her abandonment are depicted. She casts herself in the Bhagirathi and re-emerges, supported by Earth and Ganga, each carrying a new-born infant. Earth is angry with Rama, Ganga defends



him. Both ask Sita to care for the children until they are old enough to be handed over to Valmiki. Rama is carried away by stirred remembrance and frequently forgets that what he sees enacted before him is not reality, but a play. When, towards the conclusion of the masque, the two goddesses disappear with Sita, he swoons. Arundhati now appears with the real Sita who revives him. This is the last radical change from the epic, for this final reunion is not marred by Sita's disappearance into the depths of the earth in the arms of her mother.

The poetry of this drama has no false note anywhere. No flamboyant rhetoric casts a shadow on sincerity. There are subtle and exquisite adequacies, as for instance in the imagery used by Tamasa. She is a river goddess and there is something tenderly moist in the imagery she uses about Sita in the scene immediately after Rama's dialogue with Vasanti where Sita touches Rama who has fainted. "By the pleasurable sensation caused by the touch of her beloved lord, my dear child is covered with perspiration, with her hair standing on end and her frame trembling, thus resembling the twig of a Kadamba tree with buds just opening, shaken by the breeze and sprinkled by the new shower." More significant is Tamasa's comment on the episodic stream of the whole story. "The one sentiment of pathos, divided by a diversity of causes, undergoes different variations, as water assumes the different conditions of eddies, bubbles and waves, and it is all, nevertheless, but water." This comment has an oblique reference to the play itself, built upon the sentiment of pathos (Karuna Rasa). Every episode and situation has been chosen to strengthen this dominant sentiment and mood. But the pathos here wells up from deeper levels than in *Shakuntala*. The tragic experience of both Rama and Sita was richer and deeper than that of Dushyanta and Shakuntala. Dushyanta did not have to face the moral conflict which Rama had to. The tension is definitely higher in Bhavabhuti. This is reflected also in the contrast between the landscapes of the two plays. In *Shakuntala*, we do not move from the tranquil clearing in the woods to the depths of the forest beyond. Like Wordsworth, Kalidasa would have been ill at ease with the tropical landscape, though he was a great lover of nature and belonged to the tropics. But the landscape in Bhavabhuti's play can at times be as desolate as bereaved hearts,

river



as awe-inspiring as their tragedy. "This is the mountain Kraunchavata with its flocks of crows sitting silent in the vast clumps of bamboos resounding with the mournful hootings of owls. Here, frightened by the cries of the peacocks roaming about, the snakes coil higher round the branches of the old sandal trees. Near by are the southern ranges with their peaks darkened by the clouds resting on their points and with the waters of the Godavari roaring and splashing in their caves. And these are those holy confluences of rivers with deep waters, awful with the tumult of the waves rushing forth in wild confusion and dashing against one another."

#### IV. *Decadent Profusion*

After Bhavabhuti, the quality of dramatic writing steadily declined. There were many reasons for this. The more ambitious type of drama, as distinguished from the social comedy which we shall study shortly, evolved under the direct patronage of the court and was inhibited by the conventions of courtly life and taste. Serious tragedy was distasteful. There was no continuous and invigorating contact with either the life or the idiom of the masses. The Kavya itself had lost its contact with the profound depths of the inner life and become a technical display. The absence of inspiration was overlooked if there was a thick crust of scholarship on the surface. This Kavya manner spread to the drama. The old, salutary caution of Bharata that the drama was above all a visually and plastically represented production, was forgotten. This made the plays sprawl to enormous lengths. Even Bhavabhuti's *Malati Madhava* had extended beyond the reasonable length for dramatic presentations, though his close contact with the stage and actors had preserved its quality as a drama meant and suited for the stage. But Murari's *Anargha Raghava* is twice as long as *Malati Madhava*. Further, it has degenerated to the level of a Kavya to be read, instead of being a drama to be staged. The proportion of verses also increases enormously. There are five hundred and forty stanzas in Murari's play. Since the motivation now is the display of technical virtuosity, these verses rapidly lose all dramatic relevance. Their leisurely build-up, long lingering on purely descriptive intent, and ornateness, slow down the



overall tempo far below the minimum level compatible with dramatic tension. The dramatists themselves become oblivious of the requirements of the stage and consciously accept the Kavya as their model. Thus we find Raja Sekhara taking pride in the bulk of his *Bala Ramayana*, and recommending it for reading, for the merit of its diction.<sup>27</sup>

The nadir is reached in such compositions as the *Dutangada*, the *Maha Nataka* and the *Gopala Keli Chandrika*, the first two on the Ramayana story and the last on the Krishna legend. The *Dutangada* of Subhata<sup>28</sup> belongs to the thirteenth century and describes the embassy of Angada who is sent to demand restoration of Sita from Ravana. The second play is known in four versions. The Bengal version, in ten acts and 720 verses, was arranged by Madhusudana and is named *Maha Nataka*.<sup>29</sup> The West Indian version, compiled by Damodara Misra of the tenth or eleventh century, in fourteen acts and 548 verses, is named *Hanuman Nataka*,<sup>30</sup> legend ascribing the authorship to Hanuman. Both cover the entire story of the Ramayana. The *Gopala Keli Chandrika*<sup>31</sup> of Ramakrishna of Gujarat is of unknown date, but certainly later than the *Maha Nataka* as that play is referred to in the prologue. The problem presented by such compositions is intriguing.<sup>32</sup> They sprawl to enormous lengths, string together episodes and heterogeneous material from a great number of plays, and lapse completely into the narrative manner. But there is evidence that the *Dutangada* at least was presented at the spring festival in commemoration of the restoration of the Siva temple of Somanath in Kathiawar. Probably the form here relapsed to the manner of early bardic recitals, the actors being mainly narrators though dialogues might have been distributed among the various actors. It could have been presented before a popular audience with its less exacting standards but the classical dramatic form has collapsed entirely.

Though the quality went down, the decadent phase was also a prolific phase. The number of plays in print and manuscripts totals to over six hundred.<sup>33</sup> We can only attempt a rapid survey here. We should also remember that many plays, in spite of their weakness, were not wholly unsuitable for the stage.

The epics, naturally, were the main sources for the themes of later drama. One of the earliest dramas of the decadent phase



based on the Ramayana story is the *Ascharya Chudamani* of the Kerala writer of the ninth century, Sakti Bhadra.<sup>34</sup> He has taken over the idea of a feud between Rama and Ravana from Bhavabhuti's *Mahavira Charita*. The play takes its name from Sita's crest-jewel which Hanuman brings back from Lanka. Murari, who wrote during the late ninth or early tenth century, also borrows the motif of the feud, but does not develop its dramatic possibilities, in his *Anargha Raghava*.<sup>35</sup> He unconsciously gives himself away when he refers to his work as a poem,<sup>36</sup> for if it is to be enjoyed at all this long composition has to be read as a Kavya. There are some abominable intrusions of scholarship, of a less savoury kind, as when Rama talks about the erotic art to Sita on the return flight from Lanka. Less unpardonable, but not less irrelevant, is Rama's discourse on the Vaidarbhi diction in poetry. Murari pads his work with very lengthy descriptive passages. Taking a cue from Kalidasa's *Raghu Vamsa*, he makes use of the flight of Rama and Sita in Ravana's air-borne car to give descriptions of well-known places like Ujjaini, Varanasi, Kailasa, Prayag, Panchavati, Kundina, Kanchi, etc.<sup>37</sup> But Murari's poetry has undeniable felicity. There is a fine landscape painting. "There are seen the towering slopes as of sand where the pollen has showered from the mango shoots, shaken by female cuckoos intoxicated by heady spring. The antelopes fleeing in fear before the hunter can scarce leap over them. But the clouds of dust they raise keep them safe by concealing the path of their flight."<sup>38</sup> He can give an evocative vision of merry damsels on their way to, or returning from, trysts. "Foot prints on pavement of moon-stone, marked with the lac that dyes deep the feet, wet with the drops that have the radiance of rising cream, made with anxiety at every step as the Chakoras fly up disturbed, mark the path of the amorous damsels."<sup>39</sup> He can pay a smooth, flowery, musical tribute. "When the moon is placed in the scales, fair-limbed one, against thy face, assuredly it is found wanting and to balance the deficit, the stars must shine as make-weights."<sup>40</sup> And he can paint the torment of love. "Its painted mark obliterated by the moisture which streams from the wearied brow over the face, the cheek reveals the longing of women melancholy as the wan moon."<sup>41</sup>

The attribution of *Kunda Mala*<sup>42</sup> to Dingnaga has been con-



tested by De,<sup>43</sup> according to whom it was composed by Viranaga. This play also has been inspired by Bhavabhuti, but has not been able to absorb and digest that inspiration. The title is derived from a wreath of flowers carried by the breeze and dropped at Rama's feet. Rama recognises in it the design of Sita's hands and the clue is followed up in a manner which anticipates detective fiction. A confusing adaptation of the masque in *Uttara Rama Charita* follows. Sita can see Rama; Rama cannot see her; but for some reason, he can see her image in water. But poor Rama thinks that the image was that of Tilottama who comes to play Sita's role in the masque. Finally everybody, above all the dramatist, is happy because Rama and Sita are reunited, though poor Sita has once again to go through the fire-ordeal.

Raja Sekhara, who wrote during the late ninth or early tenth century, must have got away with his *Bala Ramayana*<sup>44</sup> mainly because it never reached the public because of the utter impossibility of staging it. With a prologue as long as an act and loaded with autobiographical details, with ten acts each as long as a small play, with about 740 verses, most of them in leisurely metres, slowing down the tempo, this monstrously long composition is a weird melange of the most heterogeneous material. If Bhavabhuti made Manthara really Surpanakha in disguise, this dramatist pushes the ingenuity to ludicrous extents by making Manthara become Kaikeyi and a demon become disguised as Dasaratha. Like Harsha, he is keen on a play within the play and one is got up for the amusement of Ravana. The court dramatist who got this idea must have been very dense, because he chose the betrothal of Sita to Rama as his theme, which naturally infuriates Ravana. So another attempt is made, with a marionette dressed up as Sita and having a speaking parrot inside. Raja Sekhara must have been very fond of puppet plays, for we see the device again. Malayavan uses the head of a speaking marionette, representing the severed head of Sita, to frighten Rama.

Apart from the fact that Jayadeva (thirteenth century) has not Raja Sekhara's stamina to reach monstrous lengths, his *Prasanna Raghava*<sup>45</sup> shares all the absurdities of the latter. If Bhavabhuti made Ravana a suitor for Sita's hand, Jayadeva adds the demon Bana. Rama and Sita meet long before their marriage as in Bhavabhuti and admire the union of the Vasanti creeper and the mango



tree. After the abduction, Rama, like Pururavas, demands his beloved from the moon and the birds. Rama is obviously worried about Sita being alone in Lanka with Ravana. So a Vidyadhara, with his magic, has to televise what is happening in Lanka so that Rama may be reassured about Sita's chastity. If Raja Sekhara was mad about puppet plays, Jayadeva is sold on magic. Ravana suddenly turns into a demon with ten faces though normally he goes about with the modest equipment of one face like any one of us. The coals in Sita's fire-ordeal turn into pearls. In the last act, Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Sugriva and Vibhishana all assemble, apparently for a poetry contest, for they all, in turn, try their hand at describing the evening, which accounts for a neat total of nineteen stanzas. They mount the aerial car and the contest must have continued the whole night because, before the audience, if there was any, is permitted to disperse, they have to hear some more descriptions of the country over which they pass and also of the day-break.

The puerile love of magic and trickery continued its havoc. In Bhaskara's *Unmatta Raghava*,<sup>46</sup> poor Sita is turned into a gazelle by that irritable sage Durvasa which gives occasion to Rama to soliloquize in the manner of Pururavas. The *Adbhuta Darpana* of Mahadeva<sup>47</sup> of the seventeenth century leans heavily on a magic mirror which shows to Rama the happenings in Lanka. In the *Janaki Parinaya*,<sup>48</sup> Ramabhadra Dikshita of the same century makes Bhavabhuti turn in his grave by pushing the device of disguise to ludicrous excess. Here Ravana and the demons Sarana, Vidyujjihva and Tataka appear in disguise as Rama, Lakshmana, Visvamitra and Sita, causing utter confusion for every body, including the reader and the writer.

The turbulent and sturdy epic, Maha Bharata, resisted the onslaughts of dramatists running amok, much better than the Ramayana with its delicate beauty. In the *Veni Samhara*,<sup>49</sup> Bhatta Narayana, who lived in the seventh or eighth century, chooses the Maha Bharata war as his theme and achieves some measure of dramatic unity by keeping before us Bhima's promise to braid Draupadi's hair, which became dishevelled in the struggle with Dussassana after the game of chess, with his hands wet with the blood of Duryodhana and Dussasana. The suggestion made by Bhanumati, Duryodhana's queen, to Draupadi that the Pandavas



should accept five villages, instead of claiming half the kingdom, is a further insult to the wrathful Bhima. Bhasa's device of dramatic juxtaposition is used when Duryodhana, erotically excited, asks Bhanumati to sit on his thigh and an attendant enters with the announcement "Smashed! Smashed!" What he has to say is that the flag on Duryodhana's war chariot has been smashed by a storm; but the juxtaposition presages Duryodhana's death from a smashed thigh. Several complications are also introduced in the plot. Duryodhana overhears Bhanumati confiding to some one a dream she had seen. He misunderstands it as evidence of Bhanumati's clandestine relation with Nakula, the junior Pandava. But actually Bhanumati had seen a Nakula (mongoose) slaying a hundred serpents, an augury of the death of the hundred Kurus at the hands of the Pandavas. Another complication introduced towards the end of the play is that a crooked ascetic convinces Yudhishtira and Draupadi that Duryodhana has slain Bhima and is about to slay Arjuna. Draupadi decides to jump in the fire and put an end to her life. Bhima enters now, after having killed Duryodhana. But he is not recognisable, being disfigured with blood, and when he proceeds to take Draupadi's hair to braid it, she thinks it is Duryodhana trying to molest her. The heroic sentiment has been not unsuccessfully realised in the play. We see the warriors riding the ocean of the battle "wherein dance headless corpses to the cacophony of the unholy jackals, that yell in joy as they drink the thick blood of the dead and the excited foot soldiers leap over chariots sunk in the mire of blood, fat and flesh and brains of elephants shattered in mutual onslaught."<sup>50</sup> If Duryodhana is villainous, he has also plenty of courage. In vain does Dhritarashtra, his old father, appeal to him. "Slain are Drona and Bhishma who had no peers in might. All shrank in terror before Arjuna as he slew Karna's son before his eyes. My dear ones slain, the foe's whole aim is against thee now. Lay aside thine anger with thy foes, and guard us thy blind parents."<sup>51</sup> When his mother, Gandhari, also appeals to him thus, Duryodhana retorts: "O mother, strange and unseemly is thy bidding. Ill accord thy noble birth and this faintness of spirit. Shame on thee, without natural affection, in that that thou dost forget the cruel fate of thy hundred sons in seeking to save my life."<sup>52</sup>

Since we have some idea of Raja Sekhara's *Bala Ramayana*,



we should be thankful that his *Bala Bharata*,<sup>53</sup> projected as a companion volume, was never completed and in fact never got beyond the second act. Bhima is the hero of many plays. Rama Chandra, the pupil of the Jain polymath, Hema Chandra, wrote a *Vyayoga*<sup>54</sup> on his fight with the demon, Baka. In one delightful episode in the *Maha Bharata*, Bhima goes in search of the rare *Saugandhika* flower at the bidding of Draupadi and is confronted by an impudent old monkey whom he tries to ignore but cannot. The monkey at last turns out to be his half-brother, the mighty Hanuman, son of the Wind. This theme has been dramatised into lively *Vyayogas* by Visvanatha<sup>55</sup> and Nilakantha.<sup>56</sup> Arjuna is the hero of numerous plays. The winning of Draupadi in the archery contest is the theme of a play by Vijaya Pala.<sup>57</sup> This play shows an interesting experiment in dramatic diction, which, if it had been followed up, could have led to the verse-play. Vijaya Pala splits up the stanza and distributes the lines to different characters as a continuous metrical dialogue. The martial story of Arjuna's recovery of the cows of Virata raided by the Kurus is the theme of two plays, one by a thirteenth century prince, Prahladana Deva<sup>58</sup> and the other by Kanchanacharya.<sup>59</sup> Arjuna was not particularly liked by Baladeva, the elder brother of Krishna, and therefore ran into difficulties in wooing their sister, Subhadra. But with the help of Krishna, they manage to elope. This romantic theme has been handled by the Kerala ruler Kula Sekhara<sup>60</sup> and Madhava Bhatta.<sup>61</sup>

The Krishna legend provided the themes for many plays like those by Ananta Deva<sup>62</sup> and Sesha Krishna.<sup>63</sup> The latter was a contemporary of Akbar and he has chosen the story of the slaying of Kamsa. The romantic story of Krishna's elopement with Rukmini, who did not want to marry Sisupala, was dramatized by Rama Varma<sup>64</sup> of Travancore in the eighteenth century. The Bhakti cult of Chaitanya in Bengal led to the emergence of lyrical and musical plays on Krishna, with cycles of songs, not stanzas, like those by Rupa Gosvamin<sup>65</sup> and Ramananda Raya,<sup>66</sup> both of the sixteenth century. Ravi Varman,<sup>67</sup> a Kerala prince of the thirteenth century, went to the second generation and wrote a play which has as its hero, Pradyumna, son of Krishna. His source was the *Hari Vamsa*. It has interesting innovations. Pradyumna joins a troupe of actors in order to gain entry into the inaccessible



city of Prabhavati's father and there is a play within a play for managing the first meeting of the lovers, in a theatre. The many stories in the Maha Bharata, outside the main stream, also provided material for plays. Rama Chandra<sup>68</sup> used the story of Nala and Damayanti. Kshemisvara<sup>69</sup> used the story of King Harischandra, who was cruelly tested in his loyalty to his word of honour. Kula Sekhara<sup>70</sup> adopted the legend of the Kuru king Samvarana and Tapati, daughter of the Sun. The story of *Kumara Sambhava* was subjected to an undramatic dramatization by Vamana Bhatta Bana<sup>71</sup> during the beginning of the fifteenth century.

Historical themes were handled by many dramatists, but the approach resembles that of Bilhana rather than Kalhana in the allied category of the historical Kavya. The authorship and date of *Kaumudi-Mahotsava*<sup>72</sup> are not known. Some scholars attribute it to a woman, Vijjaka, whose poems are found in the anthologies. The drama deals with the defeat and death of king Sundara Varman of Pataliputra at the hands of his general who conspired with the Licchavis and the reinstatement of the king's son Kalyana Varman on the throne by the efforts of the minister, Mantra Gupta. Jayaswal<sup>73</sup> identifies the general Chandrasena with Chandra Gupta and tries to place the drama about 340. But Mankad<sup>74</sup> and Sarma<sup>75</sup> have pointed out numerous obvious imitations of Kalidasa, Bharavi and Bhavabhuti and therefore the drama cannot be earlier than the eighth century. The political intrigue fails to have the brilliance of Visakhadatta and the plot is weakened by the introduction of the romantic motif of Kalyana Varman's love for Kirtimati, abetted by a nun who weakly recalls the nun in *Malati Madhava*.

Bilhana's *Karna Sundari*<sup>76</sup> has very little historical substance, since it rehandles the marriage of his patron, the Chalukya prince Karna Deva of Anhilvad (1064-1094), as a romantic drama on the pattern of Harsha's *Ratnavali*. He does use an amusing refinement. The jealous queen, seeking revenge, tries to marry the king to a boy in the heroine's disguise, but the minister substitutes the real person without her knowledge and much to her chagrin. This amusing stratagem is bodily lifted by the seventeenth century writer, Raja Chudamani Dikshita, in his *Kamalini Kalahamsa*.<sup>77</sup> *Ratnavali* is generally imitated also by the thirteenth century writer Madana<sup>78</sup> who introduces the amourette into the

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palace in the form of a miracle and a picturesque allegory of Parijata flowers dropping on the breast of the victorious king and changing into a beautiful maiden. One does hope that the girl was a light-weight. The slender factual core here seems to be the marriage of Arjuna Varman, king of Dhara, with the daughter of the Chalukyan, Bhima Deva.

\* The only play in this category which makes a reasonably earnest attempt to handle history is the *Hammira Mada Mardana*<sup>79</sup> of Jayasimha Suri who belonged to the thirteenth century. It deals with the resistance of Viradhavala, ruler of Gujarat, to the Muslim invasion under Hammira (Amir Shikar). The king was ably assisted by the ministers Tejah Pala and his brother Vastu Pala. As the drama was written at the instance of Vastu Pala's son Jayanta Simha, it is understandable that we find the king paying profuse tributes to the ministers. But the play does rise above the general level of the allegedly historical plays of this period, is packed with incidents and moves rapidly. The king confronts the dangerous coalition of Hammira, the Yadava Simhana and Samgrama Simha of Lata. Spies are employed to break up the coalition as in *Mudra Rakshasa*. The spy Suvega takes service with the Malava king, Deva Pala, steals the best steed of his master, presents it to Samgrama Simha, who is commanding Simhana's army, allows himself to be caught in suspicious circumstances by Simhana and reveals on his person a forged document which makes Simhana believe that Deva Pala was planning a hostile move against him and had bribed Samgrama Simha with the steed. A series of such stratagems wins victory for the king without bloodshed.

Quasi-historical plays were written by Vidya Natha,<sup>80</sup> Gangadhara<sup>81</sup> and Devaraja,<sup>82</sup> the last writer belonging to the eighteenth century. But they are obvious panegyrics with very little dramatic quality.

Several dramatists tried original themes, without going to epic, legend or history. But here again, the tempting model of earlier plays often proved too difficult to resist. The *Tapasa Vatsaraja Charita* of Matraraja<sup>83</sup> is a very close imitation of Bhasa's *Svapna Vasavadatta*, the only innovation being that the reunion takes place at a melodramatic moment when Udayana and Vasavadatta, both tired of life, are about to commit suicide. Raja Sekhara made



partial amends for his monstrosities based on the epics by writing two romantic comedies. Since the *Karpura Manjari* is in Prakrit, we need not go into it in detail and in any case the plot is almost identical with that of the second comedy, *Viddha Salabhanjika*.<sup>84</sup> The model is Harsha. There are some minor innovations. The heroine is sent as a hostage to king Vidyadharamalla by her father who is his vassal. But she comes in the guise of a boy, changing her name from Mrigankavali to Mriganka Varman. The king sees her first in what he takes to be a dream, but was a real incident manipulated by the minister. The queen, in revenge for a trick played by the Vidushaka, the king's friend, on her foster-sister, arranges the marriage of the king with a girl whom she brings forward as Mriganka Varman's sister. Actually she dresses up the boy (who is really a girl) as a girl and discovers when it is too late that the stratagem has boomeranged on herself. There are poetic gleams in the play. Summer is described felicitously. "This is the glorious season of summer, delightful in the length of days, when the plantain fruits ripen and the milk in the coconut becomes more creamy, and the season bids us enjoy the delight of love in the closing watches of the night." There is a fine portrait of the love-sick maiden. "Brimming on the surface of the pupil, forming drops on the tips of the lashes, then slowly issuing in streams, betokening by their weight her heart's sorrow, there pour forth from the lotus-eyed one the floods of her tears."

Visvanatha wrote the *Mriganka Lekha*<sup>85</sup> which must have been inspired by Bhavabhuti, just as Raja Sekhara was inspired by Harsha. The heroine is abducted and taken to the temple of Kali by a demon who is killed by the king. But the demon's brother has another try, coming in the form of a wild elephant. Another writer who also imitated the *Malati Madhava* was Uddandin of the seventeenth century who, in his *Mallika Maruta*,<sup>86</sup> goes for two interwoven love stories, couple of abductions and two escapes from wild elephants.

As De puts it neatly, it is difficult to make a drama out of a dogma, but the *Prabodha Chandrodaya*<sup>87</sup> of Krishna Misra of the latter half of the eleventh century cannot be dismissed as a vapid allegory. The plot is an internecine struggle between King Moha (Confusion) and King Viveka (Discrimination) sons of Manas (Mind) born respectively of his two wives, Pravritti



(Activity) and Nivritti (Repose). But the characters, surprisingly enough, do not remain thin abstractions, but spring into full-blooded life. There is plenty of comedy, barbed with satire. Santi (Peace) who has lost her mother Sraddha (Faith) looks for her in vain among Jains, Buddhists and Brahmins. The orthodox would not have liked the dramatist's idea of making holy Banaras the triumphant seat of Confusion. The demoralization of religion has been vividly brought out in the merciless caricature of the monks.

Allegorical plays were written by Venkata Natha<sup>88</sup> in the fourteenth and Kavikarnapura<sup>89</sup> in the sixteenth centuries. They are muddled in their thought and very weak in their structure. Somewhat more effective is Yashapala's Jain allegory<sup>90</sup> which describes the conversion of Kumara Pala, Chalukya King of Gujarat, to Jainism. All characters other than the king and the Vidushaka are personifications of qualities, but the dramatist enlivens the work by introducing sieges and espionage. Some brave spirits dispensed even with allegory and wrote treatises which they were naive enough to suppose would pass off as drama. Thus Yasaschandra<sup>91</sup> wrote a drama which was merely a record of the controversy between the founders of two rival Jain sects, Deva Suri, the Svetambara and Kumuda Chandra, the Digambara. Harihara,<sup>92</sup> equally well-intentioned and equally misguided, wrote a drama which glorified the Hatha Yoga system of Goraksha Natha.

#### V. *Social Comedy*

*so called*  
Social comedy fared better than the attempts at serious drama, mainly because its satirical drift ensured a vitalising contact with the social scene and the life of the masses.

The earliest satirical comedy seems to be the *Matta Vilasa*<sup>93</sup> of Mahendra Varman, the brilliant seventh century Pallava ruler, who was interested in architecture, painting and music, besides literature. Hiuen Tsiang who visited the Pallava capital, Kanchipuram, in 640 was gratified to note that it had over eighty Hindu shrines, a hundred monasteries and ten thousand priests. But unlike the kindly visitor, Mahendra Varman was definitely not gratified. The play is an uproarious farce built around a Kapalin,



a Saiva ascetic who carries a human skull as alms-bowl. He and his concubine wander through the streets of Kanchi. The bowl gets lost. They encounter a Buddhist monk named Nagasena whom the Kapalin accuses of having stolen his bowl. A Pasupata (member of another class of Saiva ascetics) intervenes in the quarrel. But the bowl had really been carried away by a pariah dog. A lunatic picks it up and turns up on the scene.

Mahendra Varman scourges all these parasitic groups impartially with his merciless satire. The Kapalikas are trounced for their filthy habits, addiction to drink and women and the Jain ascetics for their morbid habits of self-mortification. The Buddhist monks come in for more virulent attack, probably because they were the most affluent group, thanks to patrons. The monastic retreats are palatial residences and the food includes fish and mutton in the forenoon and sweet drinks in the afternoon. We come across a Buddhist monk who has some original theories about the interpolations in Buddhist scriptures. He is satisfied that the Buddha, since he was a very wise man, must have prescribed women and drink as legitimate for monks. But the old members of the monasteries, who could not enjoy either, became jealous of the younger monks and meddled with the scriptures, obliterating the Buddha's injunctions prescribing to the monks women and liquor.

The *Bhagavadajjuka*<sup>94</sup> has also been attributed to Mahendra Varman.<sup>95</sup> But it seems to be a much later play and a Bodhayana has been suggested as the author. The humour in *Matta Vilasa* depends on the oddity of the characters. Here, in addition, we have a piquant plot. The title means the Saint and the Courtesan. A courtesan, awaiting her lover in a garden, falls dead, bitten by a snake. The saint, finding an opportunity of impressing his scoffing pupil by the display of Yogic powers, enters the dead body of the courtesan. The messenger of Death, coming to fetch the dead soul and finding that a mistake has been committed, allows the soul of the courtesan to enter the lifeless body of the saint. The result is that the saint acts and speaks like the courtesan, who adopts the language and behaviour of the saint, till the messenger of Death arrives once more and returns the souls to their respective bodies. The satire is milder than in *Matta Vilasa* but not less effective. The disciple was a Brahmin by



birth. He confesses that he became a Buddhist monk because he found he could get a robe and an umbrella. But he also found that the food, though good in quality, was not enough in quantity for his enormous appetite. So he became the attendant of the Yogi, discarding his robe and alms-bowl, but keeping the umbrella, for in no other order was an umbrella provided to members.

The humour becomes much more broad and licentious in the later farces. In the twelfth century *Lataka Melaka*<sup>96</sup> (Conference of Rogues) of Kaviraja Sankhadhara, all kinds of rogues collect at the house of the go-between Dantura for winning the favour of her daughter Madana Manjari. There is a profligate professor who has a ferociously quarrelsome wife. Sycophants, humbugs and dissolute monks assemble here. The girl has accidentally swallowed a fish-bone. The quack who arrives has not got a clue how to extract it but his absurd antics make her laugh, with the happy result of dislodging the bone. The bargaining is satirized, but the most boisterous comic touch is reserved for the last, for the marriage which is arranged is between the old bawd and a Digambara, a naked Jain ascetic.

In the fourteenth century play, *Dhurta Samagama*,<sup>97</sup> by Jyotirishvara Kavisekhara, there is a contest between a mendicant and his pupil over a courtesan. A Brahmin is called in to arbitrate and he decides to keep the girl for himself, though his Vidushaka fails to understand why he also should not have a try. When the case is over, the hair-dresser, Mula Nasaka, turns up to demand payment of an old debt from the courtesan who conveniently refers him to the Brahmin, her latest patron. That worthy pays him off, but with his pupil's money. He then demands the barber's service. The latter ties him up and leaves him and the Vidushaka has to come to his rescue. In the sixteenth century *Kautuka Ratnakara*<sup>98</sup> of a writer known only by his title, Kavitarika, incidentally a high priest, the queen of an imbecile king gets abducted on the eve of the spring festival, though she was sleeping well-protected in the arms of the police chief. The king takes advice from his ministers and appoints a courtesan to officiate at the festival till a Brahmin is accidentally revealed as the abductor. In the seventeenth century *Dhurta Nartaka*<sup>99</sup> of Samaraja Dikshita, two pupils of an ascetic try to steal their master's favourite, a dancing girl, and when foiled, report him to the king who is



merely amused and tolerantly allows the ascetic to keep his girl, when others of the fraternity, who are of great credit to his kingdom, intercede on his behalf.

The date of Jagadisvara's *Hasyarnava*<sup>100</sup> is unknown. King Anaya Sindhu feels completely upset because everything is going wrong in his realm; wives are chaste, husbands constant and the good respected. To study his people close at hand, he goes to the house of a bawd, Bandhura. All types of rascals assemble here for the favours of Bandhura's daughter Mriganka Lekha: a surgeon-barber who has cut his patient and left him in a pool of blood, a comic general who valiantly cuts a leech in two, after putting on his armour to be on the safe side, a quack who seeks to cure colic by applying a heated needle to the palate, and finally the police chief who reports with great satisfaction that the city is completely in the hands of thieves. There is a quarrel over the girl which is arbitrated by a Brahmin who claims he has visited heaven and given a drubbing to Siva. Two ascetics share the girl while their two pupils content themselves with the old hag, knowing that they will be able to share the young girl on the sly. Equally boisterous is the late play *Kautuka Sarvasva*<sup>101</sup> of Gopinatha Chakravartin. The central figure is King Kali Vatsala of Dharmanasa City who is addicted to every conceivable vice. He has got a general who can cleave a roll of butter with a sword, but trembles at the approach of a mosquito. A character called Kukarma quotes the Puranas to justify adultery. "Indra deceived the wife of Gautama. Chandra carried off the bride of his teacher. Yama enjoyed the spouse of Pandu. Krishna debauched the wives of all the cowherds of Vrindavan." The sages who spoke against adultery were impostors. "Becoming too old to relish pleasure, they condemned it, and out of envy forbade to others what they could no longer enjoy themselves." The king proclaims free love, but becomes himself involved in a quarrel over a hetaera. He is summoned back to the queen, which so annoys the hetaera that everyone hastens to console her and the king, to please her, banishes all good men from the realm.

The Bhanas or monologue plays proved ideal for satire. The four plays discovered and published in 1922 under the title *Chaturbhani*<sup>102</sup> have become the subject of a controversy as to their date. They have been studied thoroughly by Thomas<sup>103</sup> and De<sup>104</sup>

Monologue  
plays



and the former has gone to the extent of claiming that at least one of the Bhanas goes back to the time of Harsha or even of the later Gupta. The plays are attributed to Vararuchi, Sudraka, Isvaradatta and Syamilaka.

In the *Ubhayabhisarika*,<sup>105</sup> attributed to Vararuchi, the Vita (dilettante, rake) is requested by his friend to propitiate his offended lady. But when, after a series of wayside adventures which furnish the themes for the monologue, he reaches the house of the lady, he finds that the lovers, urged by the beauty of the season, had already set out in search of each other and managed a touching reunion without his help. In the *Padma-Prabhrtaka*, attributed to Sudraka, Muladeva, in love with Devasena, sister of his beloved hetaera Devadatta, commissions his friend the Vita to talk round Devasena. The Vita walks through the streets of Ujjaini, exchanging imaginary conversations with various kinds of amusing people, successfully carries out the delicate commission and returns with the gift of a lotus flower from the girl. In the *Dhurta Vita Samvada* (Dialogue between Rogue and Rake), attributed to Isvaradatta, the Vita feels bored, confined at home by the rainy season, and since he is too broke to do any more dicing and drinking, he goes to the house of a roguish couple and they pass the time discussing some intricate problems in erotics. In Syamilaka's *Pada-Taditaka*, an assembly of rogues and rakes meets to consider the question of expiation and purification referred to them by Vishnu Naga for the indignity he has suffered by allowing an intoxicated courtesan to kick him, in playfulness, on such a sacred spot as his head. Some worthies think that it is not Vishnu Naga, but the girl who should undergo a purification ceremony for setting her foot upon such a beast. One man suggests that he should rub and shampoo her dishonoured foot, another that he should shave his head, a third that he should wash his head with the water with which she washes her feet and drink the same. In the end it is agreed on the proposal of the presiding rake that the girl should put more sense into her lover by setting her foot on the president's own head in the sight of Vishnu Naga.

Though this early group sets the pattern for the later Bhanas, they are far less coarse, less exclusively obsessed with sex. The observation is sharper and the types of people wider in range.



We find a Buddhist friar who uses the words of the Buddha to win over a hetaera, a pedant who uses yard-long words, a sky-gazing poet who records his poem on spring on the wall for lack of any other writing material. We also get fine poetic touches like this from Syamilaka: "The lotuses with petals half-closed look like the eyelids of sweethearts drooping at the parting of lovers. The lingering shadows of evening enveloping the housetops seem chasing the fleeing rays of the sun. The orb of day descends in the west after blessing the heads of trees with his slanting beams. The dove's red eyes bespeak their robbing the sun of his last ruddy glow." Their light casual touch, engaging earthiness and racy, almost colloquial, diction strike a new note in the Sanskrit tradition. \*

The next Bhana we come across is the *Sringara Bhushana*<sup>106</sup> written by Vamana Bhatta Bana about 1500. The Vita, intending to pay a visit to the hetaera Ananga Manjari, goes into the street of the hetaera and in imaginary conversations we get descriptions of the girls, quarrels between rivals for their favours, wrestling, cock-fights, ram-fights and the spring festival. In the seventeenth century, Varadacharya of Kanchi wrote the *Vasanta Tilaka*<sup>107</sup> and to rival this work Ramabhadra Dikshita wrote his *Sringara Tilaka*.<sup>108</sup> In the latter Bhana, the rake is vexed at the departure of his beloved, but is assured of meeting her again, despite her return to her husband. There is a fine profile drawing. "She looks back at the peacock with her pretty face half turned, with her eyes startled, her ear-drop dangling on her cheek and her nose-drop of pearl touching her shoulder and enhancing its beauty." Sankara situates the action of his *Sarada Tilaka*<sup>109</sup> in Kolahalapura, City of Uproar. There are fine visual evocations of street scenes. Here is a picture of the gypsy: "Here comes a snake-catcher, with his serpent and monkey. Upon his head he wears a scanty plume of peacock's feathers, round one of his arms winds the tendril of a vine, and a bracelet of shells decorates the other. His braided locks project from above his forehead, while, beneath them, from ear to ear extends across his brow the single streak of ashes. Repeating the Mantra of Garuda, he cautiously opens his basket and draws forth the slowly excited reptile. While he is shaking his knee with one hand and playing upon his pipe with the other, the snake slowly raises



its head and expands its hood. The monkey then darts upon the snake and tries to grip it with its teeth, but recedes from its fury. Wonderful are the works of God! And yet what marvel is there that man can tame venomous animals, when women can tame men!" Here is an etching in acid: "There go the personifications of hypocrisy, the Yogis, who, for imposing upon the people, are counting their rosaries, and have smeared their bodies with ashes. They suffer their beards to grow, their garments are dyed with ochre, and they carry their wallets under their arms, covered with the skin of the black deer."

In the *Sringara Sarvasva*<sup>110</sup> of Nalla Dikshita, written about 1700, the hero has to part from his beloved but is helped to meet her by the advent of an elephant which terrifies all the others in the street, but is welcomed by the hero as Ganesa sent by Siva as answer to his prayer for help. In the *Rasa Sadana*<sup>111</sup> by a Kerala prince, the hero, commissioned by his friend to look after the latter's girl friend, wanders about, visits a hetaera and goes back home to find the lovers united again. Bhana by Ranga-charya<sup>112</sup> and Srinivasacharya<sup>113</sup> that have come down to us follow the same pattern. The eighteenth century Bhana from Mysore, *Mukundananda*<sup>114</sup> by Kasipati Kaviraja<sup>115</sup> deserves special notice as it calls itself a Misra (mixed) Bhana. Here the erotic adventures of the Vita, Bhujanga Sekhara, allude obliquely also to the sports of Krishna with the cowherd maidens of Vrindavan.

\* Refreshingly lively as is this tradition, especially against the background of decadent drama and decadent Kavya, both loaded with rhetoric and turning away from life to dead literary conventions, it had its serious limitations. If urban scenes and types are captured vividly, the type study does not mature into a study of character in depth as in Theophrastus or La Bruyère and the hetaera's quarter cannot be accepted as typical of the whole of urban life, which surely must have had other and more serious preoccupations as well, besides patronising loose women. Above all, the monologue play is not full-fledged drama. The Prahasana or social comedy had greater possibilities than the Bhana, but, here again, we do not find any serious attempt to come to grips with the deeper problems of economic and social life. We have already noted two tragic arrests in the Indian dramatic tradition:



the failure of tragedy to develop on the basis of Bhana's *Uru Bhanga* and the failure of the play of brilliant intrigue to develop though the *Mudra Rakshasa* was a fine model. We can also add a third tragedy—the failure of the serious social play which could have extended the undoubtedly remarkable satirical powers revealed in the Bhanas and the Prahasanas to a fuller penetration into the deeper levels of social reality.



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